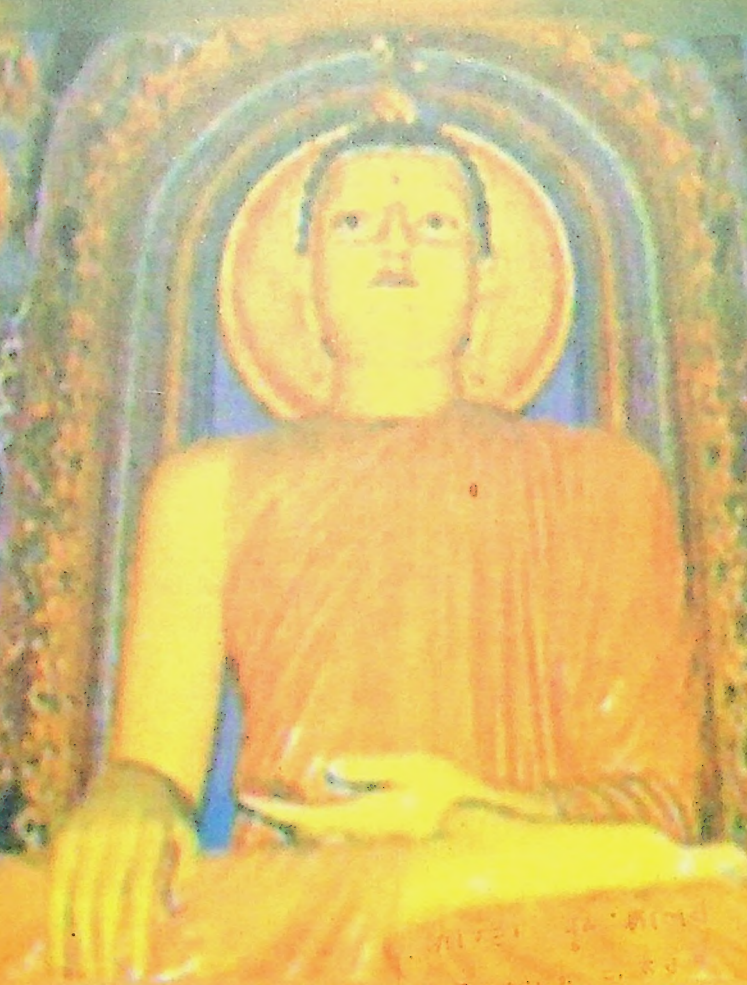




Nirvana

THE HIGHEST HAPPINESS

Meditations on Buddhist Issues



2075

SUSUNAGA WEERAPERUMA



NIRVANA

“The wise person, who is free from craving and rejoices in that freedom from attachment, who has conquered the appetites will discover Nirvana even in this world”

— *The Dhammapada* 89

श्री १०८ बुद्धचरितम्
(श्री १०८ बुद्धचरितम्)
२०७५

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- The Stranger & Other Stories
- That Pathless Land

NIRVANA

The Highest Happiness

Meditations on Buddhist Issues

SUSUNAGA WEERAPERUMA



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“Ambapali : A Lady of Pleasure Who Attained Buddhist

Sainthood” was first published in *The Mountain Path* of December 2000 and later published in *Vedanta* of July-August 2001.

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“What is Nirvana ?” was first published in the Jayanti 2001 issue of *The Mountain Path*.

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“Our Debt of Gratitude to Our Parents” was first published in the Jayanti 2002 issue of *The Mountain Path*.

In the present book I have included excerpts from some of my previously published works, especially the three following books which were all published by Motilal Banarsidass of Delhi (India) :

Major Religions of India

Living and Dying From Moment to Moment

Bliss of Reality

That Pathless Land

ALANSON LUCHEMENT

ALANSON LUCHEMENT was born at the village of ... in the State of ... on the ... day of ... 18... He is now residing at ...

He is a graduate of the ... College, ... and has since that time been engaged in the ... business. He is a member of the ... and ...

He is a native of ... and has spent his entire life in this country. He is a man of ... and ... and is well known in his community.

He is a man of ... and ... and is well known in his community. He is a man of ... and ...

He is a man of ... and ... and is well known in his community. He is a man of ... and ...

He is a man of ... and ... and is well known in his community. He is a man of ... and ...

He is a man of ... and ... and is well known in his community. He is a man of ... and ...

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1

THE PERSONALITY OF THE BUDDHA

*"This religion (i.e. Buddhism) ...
has to be regarded as the noblest one on earth ...
because of its inner excellence and truth ..."*

• Arthur Schopenhauer
Ueber den Willen in der Natur 1854

What sort of a man was the Buddha? The word "Buddha" is not a name but a title : it means "the Awakened One".

Those who are not fully awake and fully aware are obviously not Buddhas. When one's consciousness is fully unconditioned and is therefore intensely aware of both the world within and the world without, one may rightly be described as having realised Buddhahood. Every human being is a potential Buddha. Buddhahood is not a gift of the gods. Gautama's spiritual transformation was the culmination of very hard work.. He was not in any sense "the chosen one", of any outside power, divine or otherwise.

Up to the moment of his transformation in his 35th year it is customary to refer to the Buddha as Prince Siddhartha Gautama. Although the exact dates of his birth and death have not been established with any approach to certainty, he was probably born sometime in the 6th century B.C. Prince Siddhartha, the future Buddha, was the only son of King Sudhodhana and Queen Maha Maya. He was born in Kapilavastu in a district that extended from the south of Nepal to the Ganges River. His mother died 7 days after his birth and

This chapter is a revised version of a talk delivered on the occasion of Vesak to commemorate the birth, the Enlightenment and the passing away of the Buddha. It was an address to the Theosophical Society (Adelaide, Australia) in 1977.

he was carefully brought up by his mother's sister, who happened to be his father's other wife.

Siddhartha grew up in an environment of such royal luxury in the court of Kapilavastu that he was not even aware of the various vicissitudes of life such as old age, sickness and death. Apparently he led a joyous life and never experienced any kind of deprivation. Quite early in life he married his cousin Yasodhara and had by her an only son, Rahula. Unfortunately, not much information about his early life is available, but from various incidents described in Buddhist literature it is possible to get some idea of the kind of person the young prince was. On one occasion his relations complained to his father in a body that Siddhartha was excessively devoted to pleasure and consequently neglected the cultivation of the military skills which were considered necessary for one who might some day have to lead his people in war. Thereupon, on an appointed day, Siddhartha proved his skills and surpassed all other contenders including the cleverest bowman. As a result of this display of dexterity in the arts of war, the prince once again rose in the estimation of his clansmen.

In his 29th year Siddhartha's increasing disillusionment with the life he was leading, combined with his rather pensive temperament, made him decide to leave the palace so that he could devote all his time and energies to the study of religion and philosophy. The immediate cause of this strange and momentous decision was the prince's first sight of a sick man, an old man, a corpse and, finally, of a religious mendicant with a serene countenance. What he saw made a deep impression on his sensitive mind. It dawned on him that though man was liable to sickness, old age and death, yet there was a possibility of transcending all these states of suffering by becoming a sannyasi or a mendicant.

Now the decision to become a recluse was not by any means an easy one for Siddhartha because he was already deeply committed to the worldly life as a husband, as a father and as the heir to his father's throne. However, he decided one night to leave his family. He went to the entrance of his wife's

chamber and watched her sleeping by his child. He wished to take the baby in his arms for the last time before he left, but decided otherwise for fear of waking his wife. So, accompanied by Channa, his charioteer, he left the palace and went into the darkness of the night. In the Buddhist world this event is known as "the Great Renunciation", for Siddhartha's decision to become a homeless wanderer in search of Truth involved the abandoning of his home, family, wealth and power.

It is comparatively easy to renounce worldly goods but to forsake psychological security is far more difficult. This decision to leave his home was not a shirking of worldly responsibilities. On the contrary, Siddhartha took upon himself the greatest responsibility within the ken of man — the responsibility of finding out for his own benefit, as well as for that of suffering humanity, the truth concerning the origin of sorrow and the total cessation of it. In that sense this renunciation was not an escape but rather the beginning of a great adventure, a voyage of discovery into the unknown. I suppose the really great explorers in history were not so much those persons who investigated the external world as those who delved deeply into the baffling world of the human psyche.

For the next 6 years of his life in the forests of Uruvela the prince, now a recluse, experimented with himself in his struggles to attain that state which is beyond all sorrow. He went from one teacher to another. Alara and Uddaka were two such teachers. He learned all they had to teach but he remained deeply dissatisfied. The Brahmins of his time believed in the performance of extreme penances as a sure means of spiritual salvation. These penances included fasting and other forms of self-mortification. Siddhartha had 5 faithful disciples during the time he was subjecting his body to various forms of torture. One day he collapsed out of sheer physical exhaustion and naturally his disciples thought he was dead. But Siddhartha recovered from this traumatic experience and thereafter gave up mortifying his body and began taking food regularly. When he started to beg for food, like any other mendicant, his disappointed disciples deserted him. He had fallen in their estimation because he had cast aside the path of self-

mortification as a means to liberation. Undaunted by failure and animated by an extraordinary determination to succeed in his quest, he continued to meditate.

Throughout the centuries Buddhist art has depicted the scene of the earnestly striving Buddha-to-be under the famous Bodhi-tree. Perhaps he was not striving at all but just being intensely aware of his inner psychological processes. With the total awakening of his consciousness or the freeing of his mind from all traces of conditioning, Gautama at last discovered that Liberation which may variously be termed "Moksha", "Nirvana", "Enlightenment" or "Perfection".

Nirvana is the extinction of all illusion from consciousness, especially the deep-rooted delusion of "I". It is the cessation of all self-centred activity, which necessarily brings about a blossoming of pure love or compassion. Nirvana has been described as that which is Unborn, Unoriginated and Unformed. Because it is outside the field of karma or causation, Nirvana comes into being *without* a cause : hence it is that which is Unborn, Unoriginated and Unformed. It is not without significance that some of the greatest sages and mystics, both of the East and the West, have also described the Divine in terms akin to those used to describe Nirvana.

After his Enlightenment the Buddha understandably wondered whether there was any point in teaching his profound insights to a world that might neither hear nor understand him. Nevertheless for the remaining 45 years of his life he walked and talked, gave interviews and delivered lectures to all manner of persons — ascetics, Brahmins, criminals, prostitutes, artisans, kings and courtesans.

The Buddha remembered the five ascetics who had once been his followers and had later deserted him. In the famous Deer Park in Benares he preached the doctrine of the Middle Way. Salvation, he maintained, cannot be found through adhering to either of the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. He had personally tried out both methods and found them wanting.

The aged Suddhodhana longed to meet his son who had now become a Buddha. He sent for him. The Buddha arrived in Kapilavastu accompanied by his disciples and the following day they all set out begging for alms. King Suddhodhana was most upset because his son was walking the streets with his begging bowl. Shocked by the Buddha's behaviour, he went to meet him, and asked, "Why do you put us to shame ? Why do you beg for food ?" The Buddha replied that begging was the custom of his race. His father argued that they were descended from an illustrious race of warriors who never had to beg for food. Thereupon the Buddha said, "You may claim descent from kings but I am descended from the Buddhas of old, who always lived on alms." The Buddha then proceeded to deliver an address to his father on the importance of virtue.

Yasodhara had been experiencing great sorrow since her husband, who was now the Buddha, had left her several years ago. She dressed their only child Rahula in his best clothes and urged him to go to his father and ask for his inheritance. The little boy replied that he knew of no father other than the Rajah Suddhodhana, his grandfather. Yasodhara pointed out the Buddha to him and said that that monk with such a glorious presence was in fact his own real father. She also remarked that he had great wealth. She asked Rahula to go to him and say, "I am your son. I shall be the head of the clan. Please give me my inheritance." When Rahula approached the Buddha and spoke to him the Buddha remained silent. But the son was insistent about his claims. The Buddha told his disciple Sariputta that he could not give his son perishable treasures that would bring sorrow in their wake but preferred to bestow on him the riches of a holy life. Speaking to Rahula, the Buddha said that silver and jewels were not in his possession. Yet if he were willing to accept of spiritual treasures he was welcome to join the brotherhood of the holy ones. Young Rahula agreed to join the order and in so doing he truly came into an inheritance that was incomparably more valuable than any purely mundane inheritance could possibly be.

Many are fascinated by the supernatural and the occult. It is interesting to examine the Buddha's attitude to this subject.

In the city of Rajagaha there lived a person called Jotikkha who erected a long pole and put on its top a bowl of sandalwood decorated with jewels. He promised that any monk who managed to bring down the bowl without using any material aid such as a ladder or a stick, but relying solely on supernatural powers, would be rewarded with whatever he desired. Thereupon Kassapa stretched out his hand and brought down the bowl by virtue of his magical powers. When the Buddha heard about what had happened he went to Kassapa and broke the bowl to pieces. He then forbade any of his disciples to perform miraculous acts.

The Buddha turned down Kevaddha's request that he should instruct a member of his order to perform a miracle at Nalanda so that he might get more followers. Thereupon he discoursed on the three kinds of miracles :

The Miracle of Mysteries gives one the ability to become invisible and pass through solid walls as well as walk on water; *The Miracle of Secrets* enables one to find out the contents of others' hearts and minds (he strongly disapproved of the aforementioned miracles) ; but above all, there is *The Miracle of Education* whereby one gets Awakened after hearing the preaching of a Buddha. Yet not every person who had the rare privilege of listening to a discourse of the Buddha succeeded in attaining Nirvana. As regards the exceptional few who somehow attained Nirvana by this means, one can surmise that they were successful only because they were already very advanced spiritually when they first met the Buddha. Probably in such cases the Buddha only served as the catalyst for Illumination.

The scriptures record an interesting conversation between the Buddha and his disappointed disciple Sunakkhatta who had decided to leave him. He was no longer going to regard the Buddha as the Master since he worked *no* miracles. The Buddha characteristically answered this criticism by saying that the purpose of his teaching the Truth was the destruction of evil. The performing of miracles was hardly his objective. Sunakkhatta also accused the Buddha of not revealing the origin of the world. Then the Master said that neither was that the

aim of his teaching. He reiterated the point that the goal of his teaching was the elimination of evil.

Once a disciple enquired whether there were no miraculous and wonderful things. The Buddha replied that the monk who renounced the transient pleasures of the world for the eternal bliss of holiness performed the only miracle that was worthy of being so described. Whereas the desire to perform miracles arose either from covetousness or vanity, the person who renounces thereby unburdens himself of karma.

Although it is quite clear that the Buddha condemned the performance of miracles, yet there are recorded in the Buddhist scriptures instances where the Buddha himself performed superhuman feats. Contradictions of this kind are difficult to explain. The Buddhist scriptures have several references to miraculous deeds that were supposedly performed by the Buddha. Was the Buddha discouraging the performance of miracles by others and at the same time hypocritically performing them himself? Numerous awe-inspiring stories of miracles have helped to invest his personality with an air of mysterious superhumanity as though he were some kind of deity or celestial being from the world of religious fiction, whereas he was actually just another human being but admittedly one who had accomplished something extraordinary. In the light of his clearly expressed views on miracles, must one not question the authenticity of such scriptural accounts?

The vulgar display of supernatural feats that are usually so wonderful and spectacular, tends to attract admiring crowds, which has invariably the effect of feeding the vanity of the miracle-performer. His ego will expand through the resulting sense of achievement, whereas true spirituality consists not in the strengthening of the ego but in its total ending. Both in ancient and modern times man has always craved for power. He has been insatiably thirsty for power, not only in the social, political and business worlds, but also in the realm of spirituality. But a truly religious person never interests himself in this vainglorious quest for power that inevitably fortifies the ego, but rather devotes all his energies to that inward investigation into the nature of the ego, which alone leads to

the full understanding of the ways of the ego and hence its eventual dissolution.

When the messages of some so-called religious leaders lack the intrinsic power of persuasion and conviction, then they are given to resorting to the extrinsic device of impressing gullible folk by performing miracles. It is to the credit of the Buddha that he condemned miracles in no uncertain terms.

Those who desired to worship the Buddha as though he were some kind of deity presumably invested him with various supernatural attributes. He came to be regarded over the centuries as a sort of saviour with the power to bestow favours on pious worshippers. However, there is neither a place for divinity in the teachings of the Buddha nor provision for the granting of favours by the Buddha to those who cared to petition, pray to, or worship him. The truth of the matter emerges very clearly if one notes two cardinal principles in the Buddha's teachings : first, "*You are your own saviour*", and second, "*There is no god other than man made perfect*". Yet in a very special sense the Buddha was divine. He was divine, not in the theistic sense of the word of course, but in the sense that all defilements had been cleansed from him, thus he superhumanly attained Nirvana. For during his lifetime and also in previous lives, through his own struggles and insights, and *unaided by any outside agency*, he arrived at that indescribable state of perfection called Nirvana which is the zenith of spirituality.

In the Buddhist world the word "Buddha" is often synonymous with compassion and loving kindness. The deeds of a preacher are far more eloquent than his words. There are many incidents in the life of the Buddha that illustrate his gentle nature. An old monk was suffering from a disease which made him look and smell so nauseating that no one was willing to nurse him. When the Buddha heard of this callousness he asked for warm water and personally attended to the sores of this patient. In the Buddha's personality there was a fusion of love, humility and wisdom.

On one occasion when the Buddha was living in Savatthi he visited the house of a Brahmin priest to beg for food. The priest arrogantly abused him and even called him an outcast. The Buddha replied that an outcast was someone who bore ill-will and hatred. An outcast is characterised by wickedness, hypocrisy, avarice and deceit. Not by the accident of birth does one become a Brahmin or an outcast. It is by deeds that one becomes either a Brahmin or an outcast. During his lifetime the Buddha was opposed by Brahmins, the elitist and snobbish section of Indian society, not merely because he was himself a non-Brahmin but also on account of the radical nature of his teachings. Both by his deeds and words the Buddha was tearing asunder the age-old fabric of Indian society with its crude and cruel distinctions based on caste. He was upholding the supremacy of virtue and moral rectitude in a society that mistakenly believed that one's degree of spirituality depended on the caste into which one was born.

On another occasion, two kingdoms were about to wage war for the possession of a certain embankment. Seeing that the kings and their armies were on the verge of fighting, the Buddha intervened and listened to the allegations and counter-allegations of the contending parties. The Buddha asked them whether the disputed embankment had any intrinsic value apart from its usefulness to people. The reply was that the embankment lacked any intrinsic value whatsoever. The Buddha indicated that in battle the men as well as the kings were liable to get killed. He then posed this question, "Is the blood of men of less intrinsic value than a mound of earth"? The kings answered that the lives of the persons involved in the dispute were indeed priceless. In that case, asked the Buddha, "Are you planning to stake that which is priceless against something which has no intrinsic value at all"? The kings soon came to their senses and a peaceful agreement was reached. The Buddha helped those who were blinded by passion to see the folly of their thoughts and deeds. He did this through friendly discussions in which he reasoned simply, coolly, clearly and logically.

In the teachings of the compassionate Buddha there is no place for the concepts of revenge and retaliation. He showed love to his adversaries. A foolish man once abused him. When the man had finished reviling him the Buddha asked, "If a person declined to accept a gift made to him, then to whom would the gift belong?" The man answered that the gift would then belong to the person who offered it. Then the Buddha said, "You have denounced me but I decline to accept your abuse and request you to keep it yourself" The Buddha likened a wicked man who abuses a virtuous one to a person who looks up and spits at heaven. The spittle does not smear heaven but returns and soils his own person. He also likened a slanderer to one who throws dust at another when the wind is blowing in a contrary direction : the dust returns to him who threw it. Whereas the virtuous man remains unhurt, the abuser cannot help suffering for his misdeeds. It is recorded that the abuser in this story went away ashamed of himself but returned later on to the Buddha, though this time it was to take refuge in him and his teachings.

Probably because of his great reputation as a philosopher and sage all manner of persons visited the Buddha and listened to his discourses. Not infrequently he encountered malicious adversaries who derived a perverted satisfaction by reviling and ridiculing him. On such occasions, as always, he acted with composure and dignity. Without losing his temper in even the most trying situations, he often took pains to correct and instruct his hostile adversaries out of compassion and concern for their ignorance and suffering. There was sometimes a touch of humour in his remarks, which was not the sardonic humour that springs from bitterness of heart, but rather that which arises from an innocent joy and merriment in the funny side of things.

Towards the end of his life the Buddha suffered a painful illness and declared that he could not live long. He seems to have had a definite premonition of his death. "Within three months the Enlightened One will pass away. My age is accomplished, my life is done; I will leave you and depart, having relied on myself alone. Be earnest, O monks, watchful and pure ! Steadfast in resolve, watch your own hearts !

Whosoever adheres to the teachings will cross the ocean of life and put an end to sorrow !"

It happened that the Buddha, who was then living in Pava, accepted an invitation from a goldsmith called Chunda to have a morning meal at his home. Chunda took great pains to prepare the food as well as he could for he held the Buddha in much reverence. He cooked a meal of rice and mushrooms. After the Buddha and his retinue of monks had taken their seats in the house of Chunda, the Buddha told Chunda, "Serve me with the mushrooms and serve the monks with the other hard and soft food". His instructions were faithfully carried out. The Buddha then told Chunda, "The mushrooms that remain, Chunda, bury them in a pit. I see no one in the world of gods and men, except the Buddha, by whom it could be properly eaten and digested." Accordingly Chunda buried the remaining mushrooms in a pit. No sooner had the Buddha eaten them than he began to suffer from violent pains and dysentery. He endured the pains and asked Ananda, his favourite disciple, to accompany him to Kusinara.

It was in Kusinara that the Buddha gave his last instructions before leaving the world. "You may think 'We have no Master any more', but that is not so," the Buddha told Ananda, "for after my departure the teachings that have been taught are the Master". The last moments of his life have been lovingly recorded with the same attention to all the dramatic details as is found in such works as Plato's account of the death of Socrates. Before he passed away the Buddha asked the assembly of 500 monks present whether they needed clarification on any doctrinal matter or the rules of conduct. He urged them to ask questions so that they might never reproach themselves afterwards with the thought that 'the Master was face to face and we could not ask him.' The monks were silent. For the second and the third time the Buddha repeated his request but the monks maintained their silence. "It maybe, monks," said the Buddha, "that you do not ask out of reverence for the Master; let a friend tell it to his friend." The monks were still silent. Then Ananda addressed the Buddha and remarked how marvellous it was that no one present in the assembly had any

doubt or uncertainty on matters pertaining to the teachings. The Buddha then uttered his memorable last words :

*"Decay is inherent in all component things;
work out your salvation with diligence" !*

So passed away one of the greatest, noblest and wisest of human beings who ever lived. Scholars will probably always wrangle over questions concerning the authenticity of the available records of his teachings that were given to the world more than 2,500 years ago. The exact facts about the Buddha's life may never be known with absolute certainty. Yet by objectively and intelligently examining the various incidents in his life as reported in the traditional accounts, we can at least capture something of the spirit that animated the lofty mind and gentle heart of Gautama the Buddha.



2

AMBAPALI : A LADY OF PLEASURE

Whenever a human being with an immoral past becomes a saint it is always a cause for great rejoicing. The news about such a rare event is so inspiring for all seekers. Such a fundamental inner metamorphosis holds out hope for us poor mortals on earth.

Let us consider why Ambapali is held in reverence in the Buddhist world. It was because of Ambapali's good karma in previous lives that she was reborn as a contemporary of the Buddha. Superficially, hers looked like a pleasant and exciting life but, in reality, it was a deeply troubled one. She showed us the truth that everybody has the innate capacity to transcend the depths of depravity and ascend to the very summit of the mountain top of spirituality. Her life story is fascinating. Why did this wealthy and renowned beauty, who had been enjoying the love and companionship of aristocrats and princes, get very sick and tired of her sorrowful enslavement to the samsaric cycle of births and deaths ?

Ambapali was born in the famous city of Vaisali, the capital of the kingdom of the aristocratic and affluent Lichchavis who were not only powerful but also proud. We associate the name of the Buddha with Vaisali because the Enlightened One visited this place several times and spent his last retreat in a nearby village.

Once a gardener of a Lichchavi ruler discovered a baby girl lying under an *amba* (mango) tree. Naturally the infant was called Ambapali. "Mango-girl" soon became her nickname.

According to tradition, Ambapali had no human parents but came into existence spontaneously. In bygone lives she had

not only striven after spiritual perfection but had even been a nun, having entered the order during the ministry of a previous Buddha called Sikhi. Disgusted with birth by means of parents, she was very keen on spontaneous rebirth wherein there is no external human agency whatsoever. That exactly was what took place in her final reincarnation. The gardener who brought the child to the city might not have known about the mysterious circumstances surrounding her birth. Probably the man regarded her as a mere helpless foundling.

It is difficult to provide a simple explanation of her spontaneous origin. All explanations are the product of our fallible minds. Man makes theories, only to become enslaved by them later. Some questions are probably beyond the capacity of the mind to understand. Nevertheless, let us investigate this strange happening. Theists might argue that certain events *seem* to happen accidentally. They say that this is only an appearance, since they are all in actual fact preordained by an unseen omnipotent Being. Others might maintain that the workings of thought are not at all mysterious but comprehensible to those who understand the law of karma. Ambapali's strong-willed determination to be reborn in a specified manner was so powerful that she got her wish. The karmic seed that she had sown in a former life simply germinated in a subsequent one.

With the passage of time the girl blossomed into a young woman of great personal charm and beauty. Soon she became the darling of the rich and famous. Powerful and privileged men wooed her. When some of the Lichchavi princes eagerly desired to marry Ambapali, hoping thereby to have exclusive possession of her, it resulted in bitterness, conflicts and fighting.

The theme of men fighting over a woman, which is as old as the hills, inspired Homer's *Iliad* of classical times. The kidnapping of Sita by a demon king is central to the plot of Valmiki's masterpiece of religious literature *The Ramayana*. But as far as we know, no prince dared to take Ambapali away, using force. Yet they importuned her with offers of marriage.

The princes tried hard to settle their dispute by peaceful negotiation. Apparently their efforts were depressing and frustrating because of their competing claims to the sole

ownership of her. We do not know if Ambapali herself had had any say in this matter, but these tactful men handled the delicate situation with considerable diplomatic skill. They decided to use her equally between them! Soon the damsel was not exactly a common prostitute but a respectable courtesan who was dispensing sexual favours only to those who were considered socially superior.

Ambapali was not after all such a bad woman because her philanthropic disposition and compassion prompted her to make considerable donations of her wealth to charity. This particular detail is noteworthy since the virtue of *Dana* (liberality, generosity or almsgiving) is the first in the list of the ten *Paṇamitas* (perfections or qualities) that lead to the supreme state of Buddhahood. It is considered possible to whittle away the ego's urge to cling to things by parting with one's treasured possessions.

One of Ambapali's distinguished friends was King Bimbisara of Magadha. He is remembered as the first of the kings who served and supported the Buddha. Once when the king asked the great sage where he would like to reside, the Buddha specified that it should be a pleasant and secluded place that is neither crowded during the day nor too noisy at night. It must also be airy with a minimum of noise wherein it would be possible to live in privacy. Thereupon the king donated to the Buddha his Bamboo Grove with many shady trees. Later in this tranquil Veluvanarama Park the Buddha spent several rainy seasons.

After meeting the famed beauty in person, even this good King Bimbisara, despite his righteousness and the nobility of his mind, succumbed to the temptation to make love to her. Consequently, Ambapali gave birth to a son. The narrative needs to be interrupted now but it will be resumed later.

While going on his final journey with a large number of monks, the Buddha resided temporarily at Vaisali. He stayed at Ambapali's Mango Grove and gave an address to his retinue of monks. "Be mindful and thoughtful, O bhikkus," he declared, "whatever you do, always have an alert mind. At all

times be watchful when you are eating or drinking, walking or standing, sleeping or being awake, talking or remaining silent."

The news that the Buddha was staying in her Mango Grove made Ambapali extremely happy. Who would not take this unexpected visit from so exalted a sage as a great blessing ? Wearing a simple dress without any jewellery, she approached the Buddha and respectfully sat near his feet. It is reported that the Buddha thought to himself as follows : "This woman's heart is tranquil and composed, in spite of her earthly friends and the kings and princes who treat her with special kindness. This maiden is thoughtful and steadfast, although she associates with pleasure-loving persons. What a rare human being ! This wise woman of true piety has the capacity for understanding the Truth in its entirety, despite her life of luxury." Thereafter he preached her a sermon. Her face lit up as she listened to the Dharma, the liberating teachings of the Enlightened One.

"May I have the honour," said Ambapali, "of inviting you and the monks for a meal in my home tomorrow ?"

The Buddha indicated his consent by being quiet.

The Lichchavi princes heard that Ambapali was going to have the privilege of entertaining the Buddha in her own home. They reacted to this piece of information in an envious and resentful way. After dressing up in all their finery, the princes mounted their beautiful carriages and proceeded to meet the Buddha in person. But Ambapali in her carriage drove up against them. The two parties confronted each other.

"Ambapali," they pleaded, "we will give you one hundred thousand gold coins if you allow us to play host to the Blessed One. Let him be our guest instead of yours."

"No, my lords," replied Ambapali, "even if you give me the whole of Vaisali and all its territory, I will still not forego this great honour."

Feeling disappointed but not defeated, the Lichchavi princes then went to meet the Buddha himself. They felt very happy when the Master delivered a religious discourse. Next the princes invited him for a meal at their palace.

"I have already promised to be Ambapali's guest," said the Buddha, declining their request. On returning home, the princes were complaining that they had been outdone by a mere mundane maid !

Taking his begging-bowl with him and accompanied by monks, the Buddha went to Ambapali's residence early in the morning. She served them with sweet rice and cakes and various kinds of good food that had been prepared in her own park. After the meal was over, Ambapali took a low seat beside him and declared, "Lord, I present this Mango Grove to the community of monks that is headed by the Buddha." He accepted the gift and gave her spiritual instructions.

We have referred to the baby boy who was born in consequence of King Bimbisara's liaison with his paramour Ambapali. This son became not only the monk Wimala-Kondanna but also an Arhat. It was after listening to an inspiring sermon preached by this great son of hers that Ambapali decided to enter the order of nuns. She subsequently became an Arhat herself. It is ironic indeed that the very human being who came into existence because of Ambapali's sexual promiscuity was indirectly instrumental in her own Liberation from the shackles of samsara and karma.

What precipitated her attainment of Nirvana ? She took as her subject of meditation the perishable nature of her physical organism.

After hearing a discourse by her son, the Arhat Wimala-Kondanna, Ambapali decided not only to become a nun but also to meditate on the transient nature of her body. This sadhana helped her to understand the law of impermanence — Anicca.

Although the consensus of opinion is that this particular spiritual practice was the immediate reason and the single most important factor in her attainment of Liberation, one should not ignore the fact that she had been preparing for this Freedom in her previous lives. There is usually a long chain of karmic causes leading to the penultimate stage before Enlightenment. It is necessary to reiterate the point that it was

her good karma of past lives that enabled her to be reborn during the lifetime of the Buddha and thereby benefit from personal contact with the Teacher. Even the son she bore became a disciple of the Buddha and later blossomed into an Arhat. It is debatable whether it was the Buddha or her own son who served as the catalyst for her inner Transformation; but on the other hand, it can be argued that it was nothing but her own assiduously practised sadhana that precipitated her Nirvana. Questions relating to *why* some succeed or fail in their spiritual quest are difficult to answer, but suffice it to say that these riddles are probably beyond the ken of man. Probably as soon as we become Arhats, if we ever do, we might find the right answers.

In the following excerpts from *The Songs of the Sisters* by Usula P. Wijesuriya, which consists of adaptations of *Theri Gatha* or *Psalms of the Sisters*, one can hear the voice of Ambapali who contemplates, among other subjects, the ephemeral nature of her once enchanting body :

Many aeons ago, in the time of Buddha Sikhi,

Ambapali was an elder nun in his order.

She and the sisters were paying homage to the Bodhi

When one sneezed, spraying spittle on the tree.

"Which whore did that ?" demanded Pali,

Maligining the noble sisterhood.

She paid for this insult birth after birth,

In the guise of a courtesan, desired but cheap.

In the time of Buddha Gautama

She appeared 'neath a mango tree,

Her glory surpassing the proud sun at dawn,

Her grace — the swans or woodland fawn;

For she had wished in many past lives

That she be of no mother born.

Her suitors outnumbered bees on honeyed blooms

*Or the leaves on her mango tree,
Until the king decreed that she
Would be the hired plaything of the realm.*

*Her only son, Wimala Kondanna by name,
Followed the Buddha and graced the yellow robe.
He came to tell his mother the selfless love he'd known
And bid her follow him to the Lord.*

*Ambapali — the love goddess of the state
Approached the Buddha, whose compassionate gaze
Stirred her, as no sensual gaze of prince or merchant
Ever did. And she on her knees prayed
"May I be of your order — dressed in rough shroud robe ?
Accept my mango grove, o sire,
May it be a haven for such as me
Who at last has learnt that life's a dream."*

*Sister Ambapali sat in rapt contemplation,
Of the change the thievish years had wrought
On her once dazzling beauty — and of her power
To lure prince and pauper in the wiles of love.*

*Years ago my hair was lustrous black,
Framing my face in tasseled curls.
Today it hangs like limp and listless hemp
The Buddha's truth of impermanence is here.*

*There was a day, when my hair
Dressed in perfumes and flowers,
Combed to silken perfection,
Trained with jewelled pins,
Lured the mighty of this land.*

*But now — the musty smell of age
Pervades it. The thick locks gone,
And rats' tails would a comparison make.*

*There was a day — when poets sang
To my rainbow eyebrows. When artists dreamed
Of their perfect arch.
Today they squiggle in a myriad wrinkles
Over forehead, cheek and chin.*

*What dimmed the lustre in my limpid eyes ?
Where went the youthful nose so delicate and fine ?
My ear lobes adorned with golden drops and beads
Now reduced to bone and shrivelled skin.*

*There was a day when my white and sparkling teeth
Smiled alluringly on princes of the realm,
But who would greet me now
Gap-toothed and yellow, like a broken fence.*

*My voice outdid the nightingale's
Love songs on moonlit nights;
But now it quavers, querulous and old,
Can I but speak — to tell you all I've learnt.*

*My graceful neck — the wild swans envied me,
Rivalled the smoothness of conches on sea beds.
Today, wrinkled and bent
I croak my message. This is the inevitable truth.*

*My arms so molded — alabaster smooth were they,
Now like withered stalks they hang.
My hands — smooth, soft, adorned with rings,
Claws of decrepit birds to mem'ry brings.*

*My rounded breasts, so firm, so soft, so full,
Swan like uplifted, claimed proud womanhood.
Now hang they empty between the ribs
Like strainers when the sap is fled.*

*My body — golden hued and warm,
Now a mass of scales and flabid flesh.
My thighs, once likened to elephant trunks
Are no more than crushed and splintered sugar cane.*

*Where are my ankles which danced to tinkling tunes
Drawn from jewelled anklets and silver bells.
Where are my feet — soft as silken pads
Now cracked and palsied. I painfully limp.*

*Such is this form, that age will surely spoil,
Such is fleeting beauty, pillaged by creeping years
Moving on silent feet.*

*This body, once the envy of the land
Is no more than a house of clay with peeling walls.*

*Sister Ambapali reached realisation one day
Absorbing all knowledge through the three fold way,
Non-returner was she, before her days were done,
Temptress of an empire — Nibbana won.*

Instead of making vain attempts to speculate about the Imperishable, Buddhists try to understand the fact that they are strongly attached to perishable things. While meditating on their sad plight, they realise that it is their craving for the perishable that prevents them from realising the Imperishable. One cannot think about the Imperishable. Neither can it be sought after nor invited.

Buddhist philosophers have wisely avoided trying to describe Nirvana. Is it really possible to describe it with anything like

accuracy ? Any description of Nirvana will only remain a mass of meaningless words, except for Arhats who have actually attained that exalted state. Seeing the impossibility of conveying the details of his attainment, the Buddha approached the question negatively by stating what Nirvana is *not*. "*That abode,*" declared the Buddha, "*is unborn, uncreated, unmanifested and unconditioned.*"

Is there anything in the entire universe that never changes and lasts forever ? Even the sun and the stars will someday burn themselves out. Is there any living being that is not subject to decay and death ? All things and all beings have a transitory existence and hence are impermanent. Ambapali perfectly comprehended the doctrine of Anicca (impermanence).

Not only the external world but also the inner world of consciousness is caught up in a whirlpool of ceaseless alteration. Past memories, thoughts, feelings and sensations keep vying with one another to rise to the surface. Thoughts come and go with lightning speed so that it is extremely difficult to keep pace with even a few of them. The constituent elements of consciousness race across the substratum of pure awareness, creating in the process the illusion of "mind". The bundle of thoughts, collectively taken, give the fictitious impression that there is such a definite and concrete thing as the mind.

Just as illusory as the concept of "mind" is the concept of "I". Whereas both "mind" and "I" *appear* to exist, in actual fact they are made up of different elements. "Mind" and "I" are only aggregations which by themselves have no *real* and *independent* existence.

According to the doctrine of Anatta (no-self), there is no permanent self-existing ego either within the ever-changing bodily and mental phenomena or outside them. This teaching is closely related to the above-mentioned principle of Anicca (impermanence). Since the ego is only a temporary grouping together of attributes, it does not actually exist in itself. There is a popular Buddhist maxim that there are in fact only bad qualities, but not bad people. The feeling "I am" or "I exist" is the prime cause of our samsaric bondage. We are foolishly

inclined to believe that the "I" is the doer; that it is the "I" that suffers; that the "I" treats others kindly or unkindly; that the "I" is reborn after death; and finally, that the "I" finds Liberation.

This doctrine has been clearly explained in the Buddhist classic *Visuddhi Magga* (Path of Purity) :

*There is suffering but no sufferer;
There are deeds but no doer of deeds;
Nirvana is, but not one who enters it;
The path is, but no traveller thereto.*

Anatta or egolessness is the central teaching of Buddhism. Whereas many Buddhist teachings can be found in other philosophies and religious systems, this particular doctrine is the distinguishing feature of Buddhism. Consequently, the Buddha has been called the Anattavadi or the Teacher of Impersonality.

Now, Ambapali's painful awareness that her body was no longer sexually attractive and aesthetically beautiful enabled her to have practical experience of the Noble Truth of Suffering (Dukkha); by contemplating the distressingly shocking changes that her once-charming body had undergone, the law of impermanence (Anicca) dawned upon her; and ultimately, her crowning understanding that there was absolutely nothing within her entire body or mind that did not fade away and die, made it possible for Ambapali to grasp the profound truth relating to no-self or egolessness (Anatta). She saw with great clarity that everything within her whole body and mind must sooner or later end up in nothingness for nothing is permanent. Thus the imperishable peace of Nirvana came by Ambapali.

It is a truism that the only thing certain in life is death. That man is mortal is a distressing fact of life that we have to come to terms with sooner or later. Has anyone achieved the state of physical immortality ? Although it is possible to prolong life, as every intelligent person should, through having the right diet and practising hatha yoga, including pranayama, has any human being ever succeeded in escaping from the jaws of

death ? As soon as we leave the womb we are destined to the tomb, and during the intervening period the inexorable process of decaying and ageing keeps going on from moment to moment. Why then do people nowadays want to disguise their decrepitude by undergoing expensive cosmetic surgery ? Why bother using any make-up ? Why this desire to decorate this dirty and dying lump of flesh and bones ?

Buddhists who are serious strive to free themselves from attachment to their bodies. They practise *The Meditation on the Five Components of the Body*, understanding that the body is just a temporary conglomeration of separate constituent elements that can all fall apart at any moment and result in death :

*Matter is similar to a lump of foam,
Sensations are comparable to bubbles,
Perception is analogous to a mirage,
Mental factors are somewhat the same as a banana plant
And consciousness is like an illusion.*

Much in the same vein, they also practise *Meditation on the Impurities of the Body*, realising that genuine renunciation of the world consists in freedom from bodily cravings :

This body of mine consists of hair of my head, hair of my body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, excrement, brain, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, lymph, tears, serum, saliva, nasal mucous, synovial fluid and urine.

Much more precious than skin-deep beauty is the inner beauty of saints who have cast aside their egos. Thus purified, they have found freedom from resentments. Untroubled by negative thoughts and emotions that originate in fear, worry, anger, jealousy, hatred, malice, violence or spite, they radiate an elusive beauty that has an ethereal quality. No words can describe the immense beauty and inner peace that radiated from Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi's austere face and eyes. Deep was his absorption in the Eternal. Being so detached from

mundane matters, he most probably considered his external appearance too trivial.

The Early Christians were remarkable in that they shunned the things of the world and led extremely simple lives. It is significant that they were not outward-looking but inward-looking. Why did Jesus denounce the teachers of the law and the Pharisees? Let us reflect deeply upon the following resounding rebuke from Jesus :

You are similar to whitewashed tombs that appear beautiful on the outside but on the inside you are full of the bones of dead men and everything that is unclean (Matthew 23 : 27).

The advent of old age can be painfully unbearable for the vain, especially for famously beautiful actors, dancers or film stars who were once the cynosure of admiring and eager eyes. Looking back with nostalgia to their early years, they regret that they are no longer in the limelight. Some of them, alas, have even chosen to commit suicide instead of accepting the fact that their bodies and faces are no longer smooth and charming but rather wrinkled. They have needlessly suffered and paid dearly for their vanity. Nevertheless, inner peace and joy would surely have been theirs had they only ceased to pride themselves on their outward appearance, which in turn would have been the natural consequence of understanding the great and fundamental law of impermanence (Anicca). That all constituted things are in a state of perpetual flux or continual change is a cardinal feature of Buddhism.

There are two main reasons for modern man's moral and spiritual degeneracy : first, the growing popularity of the materialist view of life, according to which there is no spiritual world whatsoever since the only reality is physical matter ; second, the hedonistic attitude that pleasure is the highest good which alone has ultimate value. In a sense our so-called civilisation has been nothing more than a desperate search for different degrees and forms of pleasure. So great is the emphasis on pleasure that, needless to say, people have become very attached to their bodies. One unfortunate consequence is that they seldom, if ever, ask themselves the following

questions : Am I this body ? Why am I attached to it ? Is there nothing other than this physical organism with its never-ending, ever-changing chain of thoughts and emotions ?

In the *Apadana* one can find a victorious declaration attributed to Ambapali :

*By treading the Buddha's path
I've found the indestructible state.
A real daughter of him am I.*

*I remember my past lives,
Pure is the superhuman eye,
Being thoroughly cleansed within,
There is no more becoming.*

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ANGULIMALA WAS A SERIAL KILLER- TURNED-ARHAT

Long and wearisome is the journey across the stormy sea of samsara which is so full of sorrows. Birth in human form, if it takes place, is a very rare event in this seemingly ceaseless cycle of births and deaths. A life that is devoid of devotion or lacking in sadhana is a wasted life. Precious indeed is every moment of our existence. It is therefore unethical to curtail the lifespan of any individual for whatever reason.

One of the most spectacular stories in Buddhist literature is that of the conversion of the Brahmin mass murderer Angulimala. At first he was called Ahimsaka. Ironically, the word "ahimsa" means non-harming and non-killing. The boy had a good character and an exceptionally strong body. He was very intelligent and studious. When the lad attended the famous university in Taxila, he excelled in his studies and outshone his fellow students. The students envied Ahimsaka who was not only the teacher's favourite pupil but was also receiving food from the teacher's family. The jealous students plotted against Ahimsaka. They eventually succeeded in poisoning the mind of the teacher against him. The teacher rather foolishly started believing that Ahimsaka was wanting to oust him from his position. Feeling insecure, the teacher thought, "It is necessary to kill Ahimsaka or get him killed, but that will be difficult for he is so strong. In addition, if I cause him to die it will damage my reputation and students may cease seeking my services. Therefore I should find a way of getting rid of Ahimsaka. He deserves to be punished." The teacher called him and said, "As

you have completed your studies it is your duty to give me a gift." "Certainly," replied Ahimsaka. Then the teacher made a request, "Give me a present of a thousand human fingers, all taken from the right hands of people."

Angulimala, as we shall henceforth call him, went into a wild forest and lived on a cliff. From there he could observe travellers. He started slaying them one after another. He took one finger from each of his murdered victims. The fingers were hung on a tree for the birds to eat. When the bones dropped he threaded them together and wore them as a garland. Angulimala was an appropriate name, for "anguli" means "finger" and "mala" is the name for "necklace".

The man was shunned by terror-stricken villagers. With undeviating ruthlessness he was determined to finish his special assignment. The serial killer had managed to collect 999 fingers and he needed just one more.

His mother was on her way to meet her notorious son and dissuade him from leading a wicked life. Angulimala might well have murdered even his poor mother had not the Buddha arrived on the scene. When Angulimala noticed the Buddha in the distance he thought, "Why destroy the life of my mother for the sake of one finger? There is someone else whom I can kill. I'll spare her life." The Buddha's life was now in great peril.

Without a trace of fear the Buddha was on the road between Angulimala and the latter's mother. The Enlightened One was moving so fast that Angulimala was finding it very difficult to keep pace with him.

"Stop, stop, O monk," shouted Angulimala.

"I have *stopped*," declared the Buddha, "but have you also *stopped*, Angulimala?"

Fortunately, the Buddha's cryptic remark was correctly understood by Angulimala. What the Buddha said can be interpreted thus: "I have found the state of pure *Being* as the process of *Becoming* has *stopped*; the cycle of births and deaths has *stopped*; the thought-process has *stopped* and I live in the *Nirvanic state of Deathless Being*; the accumulation of karma has

stopped. Angulimala, have you also *stopped* ?” When Angulimala heard the Buddha speak, the Truth dawned upon him suddenly and he was spiritually transformed. The former serial killer threw away his sword and weapons and worshipped the great Teacher.

“Come bhikkhu,” said the Buddha and that was how Angulimala was ordained.

When the Venerable Angulimala was once going on his daily rounds for alms in the way of food, he overheard the cries of an expectant woman who was having labour pains. Deeply moved by her suffering, he visited the Buddha and spoke about her plight. Thereupon the Buddha instructed him to be near the poor lady and recite what is known to us as the Angulimala Paritta :

Yatoham bhagini ariyaya jatiya jato

Nabhi janami sancicca

Panam jivita voropeta

Tena saccena sotthi te

Hotu sotthi gabbhassa.

“Sister, since my Noble Birth (i.e. since my Arhathood) have not consciously killed any living being. By virtue of this truth may you be safe and may the child in your womb also be safe.”

The Buddha attached great importance to Ahimsa (no violence) and the non-destruction of life. The path of purity entails respecting the sanctity of life in thought, word and deed. This principle is highlighted in this short sutta because it is no other than Angulimala himself, the famous serial killer, who declared that he had ceased being a killer following his Great Awakening.

Acting in accordance with the Buddha's instructions, the Venerable Angulimala sat near the lady and uttered the words. No sooner had the paritta been recited than she gave birth to a baby without difficulty.

Thus began a religious practice that is followed to this day. While in the process of chanting this paritta, one Buddhist monk or several of them would bless a cup of water. Later the heavily pregnant woman drinks it. This is the age-old Buddhist custom of reciting the Angulimala Paritta to ensure an easy delivery.

Despite his terrible past, Angulimala is held in great reverence throughout the Buddhist world. He became not only one of the Buddha's foremost disciples but also an outstanding Arhat — a spiritually liberated saint.

The message is very clear. None need fear of being condemned to eternal damnation. The chain of karma can be broken at any point in time. Even the most hardened murderer who has fallen into the depths of degradation can rise to the pinnacle of spirituality in this very life.

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THE BUDDHIST DOCTRINE OF KARMA

The mysterious workings of the law of karma are often beyond human comprehension. Yet it is possible to meditate on this law of cause and effect ; we can also observe how it operates in our everyday lives. Being acutely aware of how karma controls and directs the mind is the first step to prevent its holding sway over us. We ignore its powerful and pervasive presence at our peril.

What is termed "mind" is the direct outcome of past thoughts and deeds which, in turn, result in future thoughts and deeds. This seemingly ceaseless sequence of cause and effect is the law of karma from which, alas, very few manage to pull themselves free.

In the very first verse of the *The Dhammapada* the Buddha declared :

*"Our lives are conditioned by our minds;
Our nature is determined by what we think.
Like the wheel that follows an ox-driven cart,
Suffering will follow any impure thought."*

Karma is composed of the consequences of our past thoughts, words and deeds. Thus karma determines the specific characters of both the present life and all future ones. In this manner we are the sole creators of our own karma, which is the motive force that is responsible for our recurrent reincarnations. From this wretched round of rebirths there is only one release, which is the realisation of Nirvana.

Since senility, sickness and sorrow has always been the painful pattern of our lot in countless previous lives, are we really ready to sever all ties with this chain of karma ? Why do we passively accept our karma-conditioned consciousness, instead of trying to extricate ourselves from its entangling embrace ?

According to the benign or malign nature of our thoughts, words and deeds, we are going to be rewarded or punished respectively. But, mind you, there is neither a rewarder nor a punisher for the law of karma is self-operative with its own independent existence. Karma is a law per se in the sense that there is no all-powerful Supreme Being who starts, operates or terminates it. We must not allow our fertile imagination to run away with the assumption that there is an invisible, puritanical and all-powerful policing agency that is charged with the responsibility for ensuring that the rules of karma are strictly enforced.

Although there are some striking similarities between the Jain and Buddhist view of karma, the two religions diverge greatly on a controversial issue. Whereas Buddhism questions the existence of an eternal soul, Jainism regards karma as a subtle form of matter that attaches itself to the soul, thereby reducing and spoiling its essential purity, which means that the soul should be cleansed of all karmic matter, otherwise this prevailing alien substance (i.e. karmic matter) will unnecessarily prolong the period of pains and sufferings that are part and parcel of samsara.

Many Buddhist philosophers think that karma is synonymous with thought. Karma and thought are similar. Although we are aware of the continuing presence of karma and thought in our consciousness, neither of them is touchable and discoverable by means of our sense organs. Karma can reasonably be regarded as a powerful and elusive energy within ourselves. As this energy is generated by our motives we get entangled in the net of samsara from which it is difficult to escape. All our actions, alas, are tainted with motives, i.e. karma. Only motiveless actions are pure and karmaless. We shall return to this theme later.

Our thoughts are instrumental in the creation of karma which in turn affects the way we think. Karma has the effect of directing, conditioning and influencing our present life and all subsequent reincarnations until this sorrowful cycle of births and deaths suddenly stops.

"You reap what you sow" is a self-evident truth that sums up the doctrine of karma. What are the implications of this principle?

"Atta hi attano natho

Ko hi natho paro siya"

(Man is his own saviour

Who else could be the saviour ?)

The Dhammapada verse 160

Man is the maker of his destiny. Man, in other words, is his own saviour, which means that none can save him, save himself. Simply seeing that this statement makes sense will soon strengthen our self-reliance, enabling us to cease blaming all our woes on other people or on any extraneous factor. We should rather lay the blame squarely on ourselves. Sage-like Shakespeare saw with great insight that "the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings". Strictly speaking, even the Buddhas of bygone ages cannot help anyone at all : the enlightened masters can only show us the way to the other shore. For all their enlightenment they cannot take us there in person. But it will be up to us to divest ourselves of karma completely and thereby reach that sacred shore.

In practical terms it is not difficult to understand why a person who abuses his body with tobacco, alcohol or hallucinogenic drugs is doomed to suffer from various physical and mental illnesses. Here the relationship between cause and effect is pretty obvious. Similarly, serious and studious students who manage to pass their exams with flying colours often mistakenly attribute their success to extraneous factors, such as divine intervention and assistance, ignoring the fact that they themselves were solely responsible for their achievements. They were merely reaping the rewards of their academic labours.

As they went to a lot of trouble to burn their midnight oil (cause), they deservedly passed the test (effect), thus illustrating the smooth functioning of the karmic law.

If some of us suddenly find ourselves suffering from agonising pains for no known reason, it is probable that in a previous life we were all collectively responsible for committing an appalling crime in a group. Probably we had acted together. When, for example, people are suddenly crushed to death in natural disasters such as powerful earthquakes, or when thousands of war victims are mercilessly slaughtered, what is the most illuminating explanation? Their great sufferings could be traced back to their collective misdeeds, which were perpetrated during past incarnations of which they have little or no recollection whatsoever.

In spite of the fact that the word "karma" is popularly understood to mean action, it would be more accurate to state that karma denotes *volitions*, consisting in volitions that are wholesome and healthy (*kusala chetana*) and volitions that are unwholesome and unhealthy (*akusala chetana*). The Buddha explained as follows :

"It is volition, monks, that I declare to be kamma.

Having willed, one performs an action by body, speech or mind"

Anguttara Nikaya VI 63

Evidently, as far as karma is concerned, what is important is neither the action per se nor its results, but solely the underlying volition involved in any thought, word or deed. Thus, depending on the quality of the volition, whether or not it is wholesome, healthy, positive and benign, karma can ripen and bear fruit in heaven or hell, in the animal or human worlds, in the present life itself, in the next birth or future lives.

The volitions of the vainglorious and utterly self-centred philanthropists are of questionable value. Wanting to make a name for himself, a philanthropist at his own expense starts building numerous schools, hospitals and orphanages and proudly proceeds to present society with these institutions.

Notwithstanding the fact that all his charitable work would undoubtedly prove a boon to the poor and the underprivileged, it remains an ugly enough fact that he was *selfishly* motivated. His supposed charitable work was solely dictated by the desire for fame and social recognition. Did any of these so-called munificent deeds originate in a heart that abounds with loving concern for the plight of the penniless, the hungry homeless or the undernourished ?

One can speculate about the outcome of the ego-centred philanthropic activities of do-gooders. Because their motives are mixed they would probably acquire *some* good karma. Consequently, they might get reborn in very favourable circumstances, enjoying good health amidst riches, and having much joy and peace. Nevertheless, deeds that are both egoistic and socially beneficial have the tendency to strengthen the ego, thereby unnecessarily prolonging one's samsaric servitude.

In contradistinction to the above-mentioned rich man who craved attention by means of *studied* generosity, let us examine the following classic case of altruistic behaviour. A poverty-stricken schoolboy takes pity on an emaciated hungry beggar dressed in rags who is begging for food in the streets. The boy is deeply moved by the man's misery, so he spontaneously decides to forego the lunch that he is carrying. Next, he hands the food over to the beggar. He does that with no regrets, neither is there any trace of cold calculation for, he never tells himself "I am practising a self-rewarding virtue". Treating his good deed with complete indifference, the caring and compassionate lad keeps quiet about it, never conceitedly mentioning it to anyone, not least to his dear mother who had prepared and packed his lunch. Far from cherishing the memory of the event, the boy soon forgets it. Some might maintain that he has acquired good karma; in a sense he has, but as the deed failed to make a lasting impact on his mind, it can rightly be regarded as *karmaless*, especially because that strong call to serve sprang up from a *selfless* source which is the hallmark of heartfelt purity.

As it is never the outer act but the inner intention that is considered to be the formative factor in karma, it follows that

no bad karma is created when, for instance, one mistakenly, involuntarily or innocently injures or harms any living being. However, feeling ill-will towards others definitely results in the accumulation of bad karma, even in situations where harbouring such strong dislike causes others no physical or mental harm. Any kind of animus against any being constitutes bad karma. Why be antipathetic towards anything or anyone ?

The wise are given to sitting quietly, doing nothing, and sending forth compassion to all beings in every direction, be they visible or invisible, near or far. So long as one radiates goodwill and loving-kindness (*metta*), that very noble state of mind and heart is *in itself* conducive to the generation of good karma, despite the fact that there might not have been any actual doing of socially beneficial deeds or good works during that exalted state. One might, for example, not want to do any welfare work and directly serve society, preferring the peace and solitude of home, yet by merely radiating compassion to one and all as well as by leading a blameless and virtuous life, there would be an accumulation of good karma.

Otherworldly persons are frequently criticised for their attitude of indifference to mundane matters. What goods do they produce, if any ? Admittedly, they do not contribute much towards the economic betterment of society, but it must be said that recluses and renunciants act as beacons of illumination in our degenerative world that is becoming increasingly materialistic; they help society indirectly by virtue of their exemplary lives. Besides, their very spiritual quest serves as a constant reminder to suffering humanity of the timeless truth that perpetual peace and joy can only be found by probing inwards, instead of just amassing riches and having improved living standards in expectation of happiness.

Several important aspects of karma can be found in the following excerpts from my book *Major Religions of India* :

The doctrine of transmigration and the associated doctrine of karma were already there before the advent of Buddhism. Buddhism conveniently adopted these doctrines, adapted them and made them harmonise with its own special and unique

character. Karma is a natural law that operates in the universe; it is a law in itself in the sense that it is entirely independent of any external power, human or Divine. It is a law with no known beginning nor was it promulgated by any authority. It is not that one should "obey" the law of karma but rather recognise its existence and live intelligently in the light of that understanding.

According to the theory of karma a man's misfortunes are directly traceable to his immoral actions in this life or a previous one. Probably it was the existence of this moral element that made the theory so acceptable to Buddhist thought. The reason why a person gets brutally assassinated is probably because he had been guilty of murder in a former life. When A shoots B, then B is only suffering the consequence of a moral crime that he had previously committed. If we surmise that this is true; then it can be argued that society is not obliged to punish A because the law of karma will ensure that A pays for what he has done. By the same token, why engage in social welfare work and improve the living conditions of the poor and downtrodden, because the socially underprivileged deserve all that suffering which was caused by their own bad karma? If these unfortunate folk were helped, would they not be deprived of the opportunity of undergoing hardships and thereby cancelling out the consequences of their bad karma caused by their own past misbehaviour? We can see why the theory of karma is so popular in Buddhist countries because it can be conveniently used to justify apathy and inaction in the face of abject poverty and social injustice.

Such callous indifference to the miserable plight of others arises from a gross misunderstanding of Buddhism. To say that those who suffer "are only getting their just deserts" is quite contrary to the compassionate character of Buddhism. The actions of a genuine Buddhist are never devoid of consideration, kindness and generosity; he should never treat the poor, the hungry and the suffering with indifference. On the contrary, with compassionate altruism he will try hard to alleviate all distress by acting individually or as a member of a group.

Many writers fallaciously equate the doctrine of karma with predestination. While it is true that karma means the law of cause and effect, it does not follow that the relationship between the cause and its effect is unalterably fixed. Admittedly, the present has been shaped by the past and the future will be shaped by the present, but it does not follow that neither the present nor the future cannot be changed. The force of karma can be modified; indeed the chain of karma can be broken. Let us illustrate this point by considering the example of a seed such as an acorn that can only germinate in the form of an oak tree. The relationship between the acorn (cause) and the oak tree (effect) is predetermined. The acorn is botanically conditioned to produce an oak tree and nothing else. That form of fatalism does not operate in the sphere of karma. For any person can turn over a new leaf by discarding once and for all the entire burden of karma and find Enlightenment.

In Buddhist literature probably the best example of a person experiencing the spiritual metamorphosis of Enlightenment is that of the notorious criminal Angulimala. His peculiar predilection was killing people with the intention of collecting their fingers. He terrorised villages and was feared throughout the land. When the Buddha heard of Angulimala's bloodthirsty activities, he wanted to meet him personally but his followers implored him never to visit this dangerous man. Despite their warnings the Buddha approached him fearlessly and explained to him the utter folly of his crimes. Angulimala listened to the Master's words and understood the Truth. As a result of that realisation he was relieved of the entire burden of his past karma of wicked deeds and thereupon found Enlightenment.

What is it that is reborn ? According to popular Hindu theology there is a subtle entity, vaguely called the "soul", which leaves the body at death and takes residence in a new body, like a traveller moving from one hotel to another.

The Buddhist concept, however, is that there is no such thing as a deathless soul that transmigrates from one body to another. It is rather the *craving* or *psychological traits* that were

still active at the time of the death of one body that causes the same set of psychological traits to emerge in a new body. So the mind of a newly born baby is not an innocent *tabula rasa* but one that is already heavily conditioned by these inherited tendencies (karma).

All these traits collectively constitute our "personality" or "ego". Some of the most potent of these traits are our ambitions, frustrations, fears, hopes, desires, aversions, anger and the like. Now, the idea that it is these traits that manifest themselves in a new body is based on several assumptions. *First*, we know that our traits are recorded and preserved in the brain cells and remain there so long as the brain is alive, unless their erasure was caused by an accident such as a brain injury. At death do these traits disappear along with the brain? It is assumed that these traits can exist independently of their extinct brain. *Second*, it is also assumed that these traits are transferable. Material possessions can certainly be passed from one person to another but is this also true of psychological traits that are supposed to move mysteriously from the dead to the living?

The theory of rebirth, in other words, is founded on the suppositions that psychological traits, probably because they are a form of matter, can divest themselves from the brain cells at death and then travel on their own to another brain and eventually become part of the consciousness of a newly born person or any other living being.

One cannot find that final release from samsaric suffering until all the accumulated karmas of numerous past lives have been fully exhausted. Prarabdha karma can be ultimately resolved only by means of actually living through its consequences; in other words, only by the painful process of experiencing the results of prarabdha karma and thereby paying off all one's karmic debts of previous incarnations. To illustrate this point it is necessary to refer to two incidents in the Buddha's life. *First*, the Buddha was wrongly accused of murdering a female devotee of the naked ascetics. He was thus insulted because he had himself insulted a Pacceka Buddha in an earlier life. *Second*, when the Buddha's enemy Devadatta

made an unsuccessful assassination attempt, the Buddha's foot was slightly injured. This was the result of his having killed a step-brother in a previous life with the intention of misappropriating the latter's property.

Legend has it that the inhabitants of celestial spheres such as gods and devas celebrate the advent of a Buddha on our planet. The appearance of a Buddha or an Arhat is a very rare event indeed. They are the great beings who have somehow succeeded in ceasing to create karma. No longer are they steeped in greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Like colourful spring flowers that fill the air with scent and are such a joy to behold, their selfless compassion fills the entire universe and embraces all living creatures. The perfume of goodness permeates their deeds that are all done for their own sake without any ulterior motive whatsoever, devoid of the desire for reward, recognition or anything else. Let us salute the few who have found spiritual salvation by freeing themselves once and for all from the shackles of karma.

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MEDITATIONS ON THE PRACTICE OF MEDITATION

Nothing in life is more important than meditation. A life that is devoid of meditation soon becomes dull and superficial. Unless meditation is the be-all and end-all of life, there is the risk of degenerating into an animal-like existence that is centred around eating, drinking and mating. Persons who do not meditate tend to overestimate the things of this world and underestimate spirituality. But those who meditate realise that changes for the better keep on taking place in their inward nature. As they progress spiritually they can also observe that their day-to-day problems are no longer as burdensome as they used to be in times past. Above all, by meditating correctly they begin to experience a stress-free state of physical and psychological well-being.

I meet many men and women who have an aversion to meditation. They say that they are too busy with mundane matters and cannot afford the time and energy to meditate. What an excuse ! A committed materialist once remarked that only simple-minded folk are given to meditating because "meditation is just a pleasant escape from life's sorrows and trials". But meditation, it must be understood, is not necessarily an escape, for it has traditionally proved to be the quickest path to Enlightenment. Regarding persons who stubbornly refuse to meditate, they deserve to be pitied. They do not know what they are missing ! Moreover, meditation is surely one of the best ways of spending your time, particularly because birth as a human being is such a rare event in our sorrowful samsaric cycle of births and deaths. Needless to say, those who for

whatever reason fail to dedicate themselves to the supreme purpose of life, which is right meditation, are only wasting their precious lives. Now is the time to start meditating.

I was born in Sri Lanka where people set great store on meditation. Fortunately I studied Buddhism in two of the finest Buddhist colleges where students are instructed in meditation. The methods of meditation are too numerous to mention. Who am I to sit in judgement over these techniques ? Nevertheless, by a process of trial and error I have discovered that I cannot subscribe to *any* system of meditation. But I grant that others might find them quite helpful in obtaining some degree of inner tranquillity. However, does inner calm necessarily result in Liberation ?

During my schooldays I made friends with a Dutch Buddhist monk called Bhikkhu Dhammapala (Henri van Zeyst) who had previously been a Benedictine Catholic priest. A thin tall man with an ascetic face, Dhammapala once related a revealing incident in his life as a monk : "Along with twenty other monks, I was invited to an alms-giving in Kandy when we all took part in a feast. After the sumptuous lunch the donors requested me to preach a sermon. Among other things, I said 'There is no harm in making charitable donations. You will certainly acquire merit by giving food to monks but if you want to attain Nibbana you must meditate.' After we had returned to the temple that afternoon, some of the monks scolded me. They said, 'You were right in what you said, but if we all start saying such things, who will give us food ?'"

In nearly every method of meditation, alas, there is a *doer* who does the meditating. The existence of this *doer* or *I* is what keeps us in samsaric servitude. The more the "I" is activated, the stronger it becomes. Will the "I" ever be a party to its own destruction ?

When, for instance, one practises loving-kindness (*metta*), believing that one is thereby radiating thoughts and feelings of goodwill in all directions to beings both visible and invisible, naively wishing every creature happiness, don't all these actions subtly spring from the ego ? Is the ego given to doing anything that is not egocentric ? Besides, are persons who have envy and

hatred and malice ever likely to treat others with genuine loving-kindness ? In other words, given my evil and beastly nature, am I ever likely to behave compassionately ?

Whatever I do, the "I" or the ego is always there. It is like the inseparable shadow from which one can never escape. Now, is there a spiritual practice (*sadhana*) wherein the "I" is totally absent ? As the *doer* is always present in all one's thoughts, words and deeds, it is very clear that doing nothing, which is the state of inaction, is certainly preferable to the self-centred state of action. All our thoughts, words and deeds are not only strongly influenced by the selfish demands of the ego, but also originate in the ego itself. Therefore any so-called spiritual practice that is even slightly tainted with the ego must be regarded as highly suspect and unreliable.

Would not all the pious practices of the *doer* of meditation inevitably result in dismal failure since the *doer* is incapable of impartial and undistorted perception ? Has the mind the ability to observe its own nature disinterestedly because, given its subtle desires and latent tendencies (*vasanas*), the mind is inevitably an interested party ? Our conditioned psyche is doomed in the sense that there is nothing that it can really do per se in order to progress spiritually. Now, what happens when this terrible predicament of ours is clearly understood ? Naturally there is helplessness and one realises that the state of inaction is the only possible *sadhana*. Then there is stillness. It is a natural stillness, not a discipline-induced artificial stillness that is temporary. In the past the hyperactive *doer* tried hard to *become still*, whereas now there is the supreme state of *being still* as the dangerous *doer* has died. This inner transformation is an effortless happening.

This is the disciplineless discipline, the methodless method, the pathless path, the systemless system, the wayless way of turning within and discovering the Absolute and eternally resting therein.

What happens in the supreme Kingdom of Pure Awareness ? All the activities of the mind will be seen as a mere series of shifting scenes on the changeless screen of pure awareness. It will come as a complete surprise to realise that

all one's past problems and sufferings had resulted from the terrible mistake of relying upon the mind for happiness, instead of 'discovering that peaceful and pristine source — pure awareness' — and settling down once and for all.

The deceptive ways of the mind can be comprehended *only* from the vantage point of pure awareness — the unsullied substratum on which the mind comes into existence and into which it must eventually merge. Whereas the mind is just a temporary resident of this Kingdom of Pure Awareness and a proudly troublesome one at that, this holy realm remains outside the sphere of the mind. The mind dwells in it but not vice versa.

The bright light of pure awareness is Liberation itself. Can this light be suddenly switched on, so to speak, by making a determined effort on the ego's part? Would the "I" be willing or cooperative in this matter? That hardly happens because the existence of the "I" is the major obstacle to noticing the light. Actually that light was always there in all its splendour. It is simply that all these past years we have been foolishly unaware of its perpetual presence.

When the torch of pure awareness focuses on the operations of the mind, at once there is undistorted perception and the flowering of intelligence. Then it will be seen that thoughts and feelings are like short-lived waves that are breaking on the seashore, making it very clear that "consciousness" or "mind" is just a haphazard collection of thoughts, memories, feelings, sensations and the like. The contents of the mind keep on changing. One combination of thoughts, feelings and the like are soon followed by another one. The mind certainly *seems* to exist but in reality there are only streams of images that quickly appear and soon disappear. Therefore one of the greatest discoveries that meditators make is the startling realisation that there is no such thing as "mind", which is just a concept or a figment of the imagination. Similarly, it dawns on the meditator that there is no such thing as the "I" either. The cherished belief in the existence of a "personality" springs from the erroneous impression in the thought process that there is an everlasting entity called the "I" which exists separately from

all other things. But, as already described, there is nothing in the field of consciousness that is unchanging or constant.

Many are the theories relating to the emergence of the ego. Some say that the "I" thought was the first thought ; others maintain that on account of the mind's kaleidoscopic unsteadiness, which results in a sense of insecurity and uneasiness, the mind cunningly invents the "I" that helps to generate a sense of undisturbed security and comfortable continuity. Be that as it may, it is more important to dissolve the ego than to speculate about its origins.

Why do we fail to see that thought distorts the perception of reality ? Man's enslavement to thought is the root cause of his misery. Spending one's entire life with a cluttered mind is one thing; using thought only when the situation so demands it and then disentangling oneself from thought, is quite another. The sages use thought only when it becomes necessary to do so, such as for purposes of communication, but immediately afterwards they revert to their natural and primordial state of pure awareness.

The liberated sage, observing all phenomena that arise from the senses, watching without judging, saying neither "this is good" nor "that is bad", simply seeing how thoughts and feelings come into existence and then drift away like the passing clouds in the sky of pure awareness, remains forever in this state of deep meditation. This silent sphere is utterly blissful as he is no longer troubled by the doings of the *doer*. Having discovered that abiding and exalted state of egolessness, the sage has boundless compassion for one and all.

Moments of quietude prevail in the period of time between two thoughts. These are our sacred seconds. Whereas some human beings occasionally catch a glimpse of pure awareness, thereby experiencing a few fleeting moments of blessed calm, spiritually emancipated sages are permanently in this rare realm, hence peace and joy and freedom from sorrow and depression is for them the norm rather than the exception.

Today it has become fashionable to say that one practises meditation. Consequently one can find a bewildering variety of methods of meditation that are all attributed to the Buddha.

I do not know if these techniques are authentic. Can anyone be very sure about them? I have heard it said that the Buddha did not stick to any particular method, but recommended ones that were appropriate for the special needs of individuals. The matter is unclear and confusing; be that as it may, what the Buddha actually did himself is far more significant than what he is supposed to have instructed others to practise. Surely his deeds express the truth more accurately and eloquently than any words. How did the Buddha himself meditate?

Towards the end of his life the Buddha made a remarkable statement to his closest disciple Ananda:

"Only on those occasions when the Perfect One stops focusing his attention on all that is external, by bringing his feelings to an end, by steadfastly remaining in the state that is detached and objectless, only then is the Perfect One's body comfortable"

Mahāparinibbāna Sutta — Dīgha Nikāya ii 100

One can surmise that in this pure state he remained absolutely unaffected by both body and mind, neither sullied by emotions nor mental pictures. As he was totally withdrawn from all sense-experience, there was probably no consciousness of his own body either. There was inner peace because, paradoxical though it may seem, the Buddha's supremely awakened state of being was full of vitality, but calm and unattached to anything nevertheless. He was active, yet inactive in this non-dualistic state.

If what the Buddha told Ananda is anything to go by, we can surmise that objectlessness is a thought-free state of nothingness in which there is no focusing of attention on anything. Neither is one under pressure to watch the seemingly ceaseless movement of the river of thoughts and feelings nor the breathing in and breathing out process. It is also noteworthy that the detached state has no vantage points whatsoever; there is no special vantage point such as the ego for thinking and judging and observing, precisely because there is no "thinker" (ego) that thinks thoughts. Strictly speaking, there are no thoughts either for one is, as already mentioned, in an objectless

state. Therefore the highest meditation takes place only when, so to speak, the egoless state of emptiness looks at the prevailing emptiness itself.

An American correspondent, a young lady, asked me the following question : *What spiritual practices, if any, do you do?*

After a lifetime of doing various spiritual practices (*sadhanas*), I have ceased doing any !

One day I realised that the very desire to try doing this practice or that practice was really part of the mind's turbulent disposition. So I stopped doing them altogether. Now I know that not doing any spiritual practice is in fact the highest spiritual practice ! What I realised was essentially the teaching of a remarkable Sri Lankan saint.

He said *Summa Iru* which means DO NOTHING.

Needless to say, for this profound insight I am deeply indebted to Saint Yogaswami of Sri Lanka.

I shall try to express myself in another way. The thought-process is in a state of perpetual flux. Restlessness is the basic characteristic of the mind. Understanding the restless nature of the mind is not at all easy, but when there is an insight into this matter, it will be very clearly seen that the desire to do various spiritual practices springs from this very restlessness. The mind then withdraws into itself and a state of serenity spontaneously comes into being. The ending of restlessness is the beginning of heavenly happiness.



THE ART OF REAL MEDITATION

*"Gotama's disciples are always alert
And wide awake, taking delight
In pure meditation day and night"*

The Dhammapada 301

Throughout the ages man has invented numerous systems of meditation. These methods of meditation were ingeniously devised in the belief and expectation that his strivings might somehow result in spiritual salvation. In man's religious quest there seems to have been an underlying belief that meditation was the path to Reality. Having thus conceived the Ultimate in his imagination, man strove vainly to find ways and means of 'discovering' it. Seldom was it realised that the imagined Ultimate as well as all the supposed paths leading thereto were all equally the clever fabrications of the human mind.

The examination of every known system of meditation can be very laborious and time-consuming. Fortunately, however, systems of meditation, both ancient and modern, fall conveniently into easily recognisable groups. Often what is advertised as the latest system of meditation turns out to be an adaptation of an old technique by a new guru under a new name ! For the purpose of this discussion it will suffice if we examine just one representative method of meditation of each type. At the end of this survey one should be able to recognise the salient characteristics and limitations of all these methods.

There are so many fallacious systems of meditation that at the outset one is rather bewildered, not knowing exactly what

to do. Nevertheless it is possible to begin by detecting the fallacies in any one of the given systems of meditation. Now, the detecting of the false elements in a system is not a waste of time and energy. Such discoveries awaken the mind and so one is cautioned against any future involvement in erroneous practices ; at the same time, by actually perceiving the false as the false one catches a fleeting glimpse of the truth. Many of man's psychological complications spring from his mistaking the false for the true or from his substitution of illusion for actuality. Therefore the approach to real meditation is necessarily a negative one in the sense that one starts by discarding one by one all those time-honoured systems of meditation that have hitherto misled and kept us in the dark.

Some systems of meditation have been designed to quieten the mind and lull it into an artificial tranquillity. The main criticism of all such systems is that any effort to quieten the mind must necessarily not only activate the ego or the "I" in man but strengthen it as well.

The adherents of these systems rarely, if ever, pose the following very important question : *Who* is trying to quieten the mind ? An artificially quietened mind is full of the ego's sense of achievement and fulfilment.

Mantra yoga is the best known technique of stilling the mind. The spiritual aspirant is either given by his guru or he selects for himself a sacred word or a syllable, sometimes even a meaningless sound which he has to repeat endlessly. Incidentally, a word is neither sacred nor profane, but that is another matter. For centuries people have repeated words and phrases such as "Ave Maria", "Hare Krishna", "Allah" and "Om". The mechanical and parrot-like repetition of a word or phrase, either audibly or inaudibly, is childishly simple and easy. After a time the mind gets hypnotised by what is repeated and thereafter the word or phrase starts echoing in one's consciousness. The surface layers of the mind slacken and quieten down for a time. But behind this facade of peace there lies the whole of the unconscious with its entire gamut of conflicts, demands and problems. Does one become any more

intelligent by artificially and temporarily quietening down the turbulent mind ? Indeed the whole process of stilling the mind betrays a lack of real intelligence. An intelligent mind is not one that has been lulled into a state of inactivity, but rather a mind that is pulsating with life and vigour. Not having been drugged by words, an intelligent mind is vitally alert, sharp, quick and perceptive.

One of the supposed advantages of stilling the mind, it has been argued, is the possibility of enabling the suppressed unconscious to pour out its contents. Even if this claim were true, what would be the point of releasing the unconscious into the open at a time when one was not totally awake to observe ? In any case, the unconscious mind reveals itself at unguarded moments. The unconscious mind may be likened to a cunning thief who hides himself when chased, but comes out into the open when one is least expecting him. Therefore real meditation does not consist in the deliberate pursuit of the unconscious. The unconscious unravels itself only to him who is all the time in a state of pure meditation : in other words, a state wherein the mind is both *passive* and *watchful*.

For many people meditation means nothing more than rigorous self-analysis. This process is sometimes called introspection. The mind is used as an instrument to analyse itself. The heavily conditioned mind, alas, is made to operate on itself. In this process one part of the mind attempts vainly to investigate another part of itself. This exercise results only in the rearrangement of old thoughts in new patterns. Consequently, no new insights into the nature and structure of the mind are ever obtained. Because the mind is already conditioned, it is naturally incapable of inquiring into itself in a genuine spirit of impartiality and objectivity. One cannot overlook the fact that the self-analytical process will necessarily be influenced by the state of the conditioned mind with all its psychological complexities such as fears, obsessions, aspirations, frustrations, urges and the like. So tremendous and powerful is the psychological foundation on the basis of which one thinks, feels and acts that it inevitably influences and distorts any kind of analysis, let alone self-analysis.

Self-analysis stimulates the mind into a state of heightened activity, but not into one of clarity. The more intellectual one is the more attractive self-analysis becomes since the intellect can be given full rein.

At this point it is necessary to ask ourselves once again the following important question : *Who* is the "analyser" in self-analysis ? There is an illusory entity that laboriously engages itself in analysis. This entity is an invention of the conditioned mind in its yearning for permanency and security. This false notion of "I am" is the source of endless strife not only within ourselves but also in the world at large. There is a touch of irony when the "analyser" proudly and self-assertively tries to explore his consciousness, for the "analyser" is as much a product of, and is in fact of the same substance as, the twisted, complicated and conditioned mind itself, which he sets out to analyse.

There are other pitfalls in self-analysis. Through self-analysis one has the expectation of successfully uncovering the various layers of the mind, removing layer after layer until the whole structure and nature of consciousness is revealed. But the mind is too intricately woven a mechanism to be visualised in terms of layers as though it were a sort of cake with neatly discernible layers. But even if we suppose that consciousness consists of such layers, there is in this process the dangerous possibility of misdirection. After uncovering each layer, data are collected and conclusions are drawn with the help of which one tries to uncover the subsequent layers. Now, if wrong conclusions are mistakenly deduced at any one stage, this entire inner investigative process there onwards naturally gets misdirected.

Another serious limitation of self-analysis is that it prevents total and instantaneous perception. Such perception occurs in a flash and not gradually in stages. For example, the total perception of a house occurs suddenly and instantaneously. One does not analytically separate a house into its component parts first and then notice its existence in toto afterwards. One does not separately see the windows, doors, walls and roof and then, after a time, say "ah, yes, I am seeing a house" ! On the

contrary, one perceives *together* all these component parts which collectively go to form the house. Similarly, it is not through a long and tedious process of dissection and analysis that the nature and structure of the mind is grasped. That profound perception takes place in an *instantaneous flash of pure awareness* when the mind, because it has ceased chattering and analysing, has suddenly become extraordinarily still.

Some schools of meditation advocate the practice of concentration which is supposed to give the restless mind the rare qualities of stability, power and a certain single-mindedness. The object of concentration is usually a symbol, image or idea which has been selected according to one's own fancy. Sometimes the selection is made by the guru in his supposedly superior wisdom. The exercise in concentration begins with the effort to focus all one's attention and energy on a predetermined object, such as object A for example. The concentrator tries hard to direct his mind solely to object A, only to find it shifting away to object B. Then he struggles to drag the mind from object B to the original object A, but by then the mind has changed its areas of interest to objects X, Y and Z. Before long the mind becomes a veritable battlefield of conflicting thoughts that are pulling in diverse directions. This mass of confusion soon reduces one to a state of utter nervous exhaustion.

It is unfortunate that those who practise concentration seldom ask themselves the following key question : *Who* is trying to concentrate ? Is not the entity that is struggling to concentrate no other than our old mischievous and almost inseparable companion, namely, the ego or the "I" ? Is not the practice of concentration a subtle means of exercising and thereby sustaining the existence of this ego, which is *always* trying to survive in various ways ?

Instead of trying to control the psychological process through concentration or any other kind of interference, why not leave it *alone* ? The stream of consciousness, which is sometimes called the thought process, may be likened to a swiftly flowing river. Surely the course of a river cannot be

discovered by blocking or channelling it. The course is best understood by following it to wherever the current leads. Therefore, as the mind moves from A to B and from B to C and so on, is it not wiser to follow its course *without* any interference whatsoever? *The course of a stream can be very clearly seen by simply following it to wherever the current leads.* When one's attention wanders, why not allow it to wander freely? When the mind gets distracted, is anything gained by resorting to crude methods of subjugating the thought process, such as analysis or concentration? Why not find out everything about the factors that cause distraction? Every distraction has a story to tell; every distraction is a golden opportunity that opens the doors of self-knowledge; every distraction indicates the existence of some area of interest of which one has hitherto been partially or totally unaware. Distraction is also caused by the existence of dark and unexplored regions in the mind.

The empty and unconditioned mind never has to struggle. For in that motiveless and karma-free state the mind can easily concentrate on *any* subject without making *any* effort whatsoever.

Real meditation consists in the passive awareness of all one's thoughts and feelings from moment to moment.

It is the non-discriminatory and unprejudiced observation of all one's psychological reactions to people, events, situations, ideas and so forth. Meditation is a *passive activity* because one makes no attempt whatsoever to interfere with the psychological process. It is called a passive activity because there is no repression, condemnation or justification of what one observes within oneself.

This non-judgemental passive observation of the mind may be likened to watching the passing traffic on the road. One watches the traffic on the street pass by, *without doing anything* about it. But such observation is not by any means easy because we have been accustomed to judge, evaluate, condemn, compare, approve or justify our thoughts and feelings. It is these deeply ingrained tendencies that have made our minds so dull and mechanical. But the pure mind — the mind that is non-mechanical, totally unconditioned, free of karma and

creative — does not *distort perception* but simply and innocently observes everything in both the world within and the world without. The pure mind sees things as they are in *Reality*.

There is real meditation only when one is in that sublime state of being without desire. It is only when the mind is no longer volitional that it does not create karma. Such a mind is pure.

The constant undistorted observation of oneself results in the exposure of the hidden depths of the unconscious. Such observation or awareness is that pure flame which alone will burn away all our psychological complications. While it is comparatively easy to observe one's thoughts and feelings superficially, it is far more difficult to be aware of the hidden forces underlying these thoughts and feelings — the unknown fears, hopes, ambitions and urges that shape our day-to-day behaviour. Meditation then is the golden means whereby the conditioned mind becomes unconditioned. A life that is not dedicated to meditation soon becomes superficial, miserable and dull ; on the other hand, the person who cares to meditate becomes psychologically cleansed. Only in this state of inner purity does one experience the bliss of Liberation.

"This, monks, is Nanda's mindfulness and clear comprehension. Here, monks, for Nanda feelings are understood as they arise, as they remain present, as they pass away ; perceptions are understood as they arise, as they remain present, as they pass away; thoughts are understood as they arise, as they remain present, as they pass away. This, monks, is Nanda's mindfulness and clear comprehension."

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DOES THE "I" REALLY EXIST ?

The Buddhist doctrine of *Anatta* or no-soul is unique because it is not found in any other religion. The Buddha emphasised this teaching unequivocally :

"Whether Buddhas arise in this world or not, it always remains a fact that the constituent parts of a being are lacking in a soul."

The Buddha's insistence on the non-existence of a permanent soul or *atman* was a radical departure from traditional Hindu thought that had maintained its existence. What is the self or the soul ?

According to the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* this *atman* is unseizable, indestructible and unattached; it is also not bound, does not tremble and is not injured. Hindus believe that although the body chemically disintegrates at death yet the soul remains deathless and then migrates to another body, unless it has already got merged in Brahman, the Supreme Reality or the Absolute. The concepts of *atman* and *Brahman* are closely associated ; they are in fact two aspects of the same idea for *atman* is only the subjective aspect of what is objectively called *Brahman*.

Why does man delude himself with this belief in an immortal soul or self ? Is it not because of the failure to realise that his self or psychological personality is only a temporary composition of different parts, a mere bundle of attributes that may disintegrate at any moment ? How can a transitory aggregation of qualities ever have the quality of permanency ?

What is erroneously regarded as the *self* is made up of five attributes called *skandhas*. These are form (*rupa*), sensation (*vedana*), perception (*sanna*), volition (*sankhara*) and consciousness (*vinnana*). How can there be anything permanent because these *skandhas* are constantly moving and changing like the waters of a fast flowing river ?

The impermanence of all things is a cardinal tenet of Buddhism. Those who fail to understand this truth are unnecessarily going to make themselves unwise and unhappy. An excerpt from a famous verse that is chanted at Buddhist funerals is noteworthy :

Anicca vata sankhara

Uppadavayadhammino

Uppajjitva nirujjhanti

"Impermanent are all conditioned things

Their nature is to rise and fall away

Having come to pass, they must then cease."

What is called the mind is the result of a passing combination of various bodily and psychological and social influences. There are the inherited racial and biological dispositions and the acquired attitudes, prejudices and beliefs. One is also conditioned by the innumerable experiences of an entire lifetime. All these influences have made a man what he is, they have given him a sense of personality. I am therefore conscious of my *self*. Hence I feel separate from my neighbour and he also feels alienated from me because we both foolishly entertain the illusion of the *self*. When he tries to promote his self-interest and I try to promote mine, an otherwise friendly relationship soon gets spoilt by feelings of suspicion and hostility. This belief in a separate self makes us selfish, which is the primary cause of sorrow. But if the mind were thoroughly stripped of all these numerous influences, will not the *self* which is the collective outgrowth of these influences, also cease to be? In exploding the myth of the *self* the Buddha was also showing us the principal cause of all social strife.

Variously described as the *me*, the *ego*, the *soul*, the *experiencer*, the *centre*, the *thinker*, the *observer* or the *I*, this *self* is the imprisoning cage within which we wear out our precious lives. We dwell within the narrow confines of this terrible cell, oblivious of the frontierless world of perception that awaits the person who casts aside this psychological shell.

Let us consider the state of mind of the poor husband who is nagged, insulted and humiliated by his wife. He was once very fond of his newly-wedded wife but now he begins to harbour feelings of hatred for her. He loathes her very presence and desires to murder her. Yet the voice of his conscience tells him "You must not think evil thoughts. Love your wife instead of hating her". What is here designated as "conscience" is the product of his moral conditioning and religious training. He also realises that feelings of ill will only cause discord in what could otherwise be a harmonious relationship. Hence the carefully cultivated part of his mind dictates the message "Love your wife" in contradistinction to the other part of his mind that is simmering with anger. The part of his mind that is seething with hatred may be described as the state of *what is* whereas the other part that is urging him to repress that anger may be described as the state of *what should be*.

In the process of conflict between *what is* and *what should be* the illusory *I* is born.. The conditioned part of his mind does not in itself create the *I* so long as it remains in a dormant state. But the moment this conditioned part tries to control and dominate the rest of the mind as though it were a powerful and permanent entity, then one notices the emergence of the *I*. In the example we have considered, if the husband were fully aware of his hatred, without wanting to change it in any way; if, in other words, he were merely observant of the state of *what is* without interfering with it in any way whatsoever, then would the *I* arise at all ?

The *I* is also the image I cherish about myself. How easily exulted I am when others commend and compliment me ! Nothing is sweeter than hearing others sing one's praises ! How easily is my self-esteem hurt when people criticise, censure or

condemn me ! But if no image of myself ever existed, then would I not respond with equanimity to both praise and blame ?

The psychological centre or the *I* is not an unalterably fixed and unchanging point, for the mind has many such centres from which it reacts to situations, people, ideas, material objects and the like. At any given moment the most assertive centre becomes the temporary *I*. Every thought is potentially capable of becoming such a centre. When the mind finds itself cornered in one centre, it frightfully and defensively moves to another centre. Restlessly the mind may thus shift its interest from one centre to another but the mind, given its conditioned state, never seems to be able to function without a centre. These centres provide the mind with a certain sense of stability in the impermanent, ever-changing and ever-flowing stream of consciousness. So it is understandable why the mind develops a strong vested interest in its centres, which it is prepared to safeguard, protect and defend vigorously. All the attempts of misguided monks, yogis and others to suppress the *I* are in vain because the death of one centre is instantly replaced by the birth of another.

Memories are always being added to the *self* as well as being eliminated from it but the fictitious *self* is nonetheless a living *entity*: its components change but it keeps on reappearing in new forms, which helps to create the illusion of its everlasting continuity. The *self* gets re-formed and re-established all the time.

Given the mind's great propensity to delude itself with comforting explanations and theories, one wonders whether the genesis of the theory of the reincarnation of the *self* is not to be found in the *self's* burning desire for perpetual existence. It has been erroneously maintained that the *self* goes on reincarnating itself and evolving over a course of many countless lives until it eventually attains enlightenment. Through a process of gradual refinement the *self* is supposed to achieve divinity when it gets merged in the Cosmic Self. But can the *self* ever shed its basic character of pettiness and yet be itself ? The *self* can admittedly expand and glorify itself but its essential

limitation remains unchanged. Of what use is a "sublime" and "divine" *ego* if it still remains an *ego*? The *ego* may be likened to a festering wound in the mind that may now and again give the false impression of undergoing slight healing here and there, but even so does it not still remain a wound? Therefore it would seem that nothing short of the total and absolute abandonment of the *self* is required for a fundamental revolution in consciousness. This sickly belief that one is going to find spiritual liberation in a future life certainly generates some consoling hope and cheerful optimism, which in turn helps one temporarily to tide over the sorrows and problems of the present life. How the crafty mind's heavy commitment to this belief enables it to escape from the present, the eternal now! How the slothful mind indefinitely postpones the need for immediate action and ignores the urgency of forsaking the *self* right here and now!

It may seem as though the single thought *I am* alone constituted the *self*. Such a view overlooks the fact that this one thought is only the mere surface of the entire contents of the unconscious mind as well as the conscious. For one's psychological personality or the *I* is shaped and determined by innumerable thoughts that lurk in the mind. The behaviour of the *I* is governed by factors such as one's hopes, fears, frustrations, expectations as well as all those tendencies that have been unfortunately inherited from our animal past of millions of years. So it is often the case that behind the facade of a "loving" *I* there hides a cruel nature.

In the river of consciousness the *I-thought* is only one of many thoughts, but why does the *I-thought* set itself apart from all the other thoughts and then assume a domineering role? Why does the *I-thought* behave as though it were not an insignificant solitary thought but rather a powerful entity? Why, in other words, does the *I* try to order the course of the other thoughts dictatorially?

The *I* is just a subtle and clever construction of thought. Between the *I* and thought there seems to be a strange and mischievous collusion which warps our capacity for clear

perception. Both the *I* and thought are made up of the same substance which is thought. Thought is evidently a form of matter and is quite unrelated to spirit. If the *I* were composed of, say, a celestial or ethereal substance that is not of thought, then perhaps it might possibly succeed in its efforts to control, subjugate and correct the wayward ways of thought. After the astonishing realisation that the *I* is nothing more than a mere thought, and also that there exists a close relationship between the *I* and thought, one sees the utter futility of activating the *I* to guide and control thought. Thereupon the *I* ceases to struggle, control, achieve and dominate; more accurately expressed, the *I* ceases to be and so ends the *becoming* process.

One cannot help becoming deeply attached to the *self* which the mind has invented out of its need for a haven of security. So one eagerly clings to the *self*, for without this anchor of safety one feels very lonely, lost and miserable. An inevitable consequence of this clinging is the growth of fear. Of the many fears that haunt the consciousness of man, the fear of losing the *self* is easily the predominant one. In fact, all other fears are closely related to this central, basic and primordial fear. The recognition of the precariousness and fictitiousness of the *self's* existence tends to make this fear of losing it all the more compulsive.

One can speculate endlessly as to why the *I-thought*, which after all is only a mere fragment of the entire thought process, has arrogantly conferred upon itself such a superior power over the other thoughts. Speculation is an enjoyable intellectual activity for many but because it involves the mere rearrangement of old thoughts in new relationships, like the shuffling of a pack of cards, speculative thinking can never result in transcending the conditioned state of the mind. The discovery of the causes of a psychological problem will not necessarily result in its solution. Through speculation one can never succeed in finding out how the *I* originated. What is far more important is to watch the mind at work very closely and objectively, especially when the *ego* is asserting itself, because such intensive observation will at least reveal, among other things, the comforts and consolations, not to mention the sense

of security that we constantly derive on account of the existence of the *I*. It is not intellectual speculation but careful non-intellectual observation that would lead to the dissolution of the *I*.

Apparently the mind cannot function either sanely or efficiently unless it has a certain firm foundation of stability, order and security. That is why an agitated, disorderly and restless mind is incapable of perceiving profoundly, let alone experiencing the joy of peace and serenity. Therefore in its paramount and obsessive desire for an undisturbed abode of security, the mind plays upon itself the trick of inventing the *self* which it thenceforth regards as an invincible citadel of stability, order and security. How interesting that the mind is not averse to deluding itself so long as it is rewarded with a sense of security by doing so ! Yet need the mind resort to so devious a device in its quest for security ? If only one were intensely aware of the subtle inner workings of the mind, and especially of the manner in which the whole structure of the *self* gets established, would not that very observation usher into the mind a genuine order and security ? Is not this clarity of perception the only abiding security ?

Do what you may, the *self* is always there, lurking in the background with its sinister intentions. The *self*, alas, is like an inseparable dark shadow that casts a gloom over all our activities. The man who covetously aspires to become a multimillionaire is as *self-seeking* as the devotee who yearns to realise God. The desire to climb the social ladder of respectability is not basically different from the pious desire to distinguish oneself in the spiritual hierarchy by becoming a saint, for in both cases the motivations are clearly traceable to a common source — the passion for *self-glorification*.

When the fulfilment of its various ambitions gets thwarted one notices how the frustrated *self* then begins to contemplate the possibility of its own *self-destruction*. But the seriousness and sincerity of the *self's* desire to commit suicide is a matter that needs some probing. For underlying the desire for extinction is the concealed hope of finding elsewhere, possibly in another realm of existence, a greater measure of safety, security and

permanency for the *self*. The desire for the cessation of the *I* can only emanate from the *I* itself and not from the emancipated state wherein the *self* has ceased to be. The nature of the *self* is such that it is only capable of moving from one state of servitude to another. Never can the *self* take a flight to the wide open skies of spiritual freedom. Never can the *self* seek or attain Illumination. Therefore it is most important to draw an essential distinction between the *freedom of the self* and *freedom from the self*. *Freedom of the self* is a contradiction and an absurdity for the simple reason that the *self*, on account of its inherently restrictive nature, can *never* be free .

The petty *self*, because of its narrowness, cannot help isolating itself in all its activities. The circumference within which it operates defines the extent of its little world and within this restricted area the *self* deceptively regards itself as being "free". But when a mind has no centre , it will have no circumference either : it is without frontiers, like the vastness and limitlessness of space.

How characteristic of the *self* that it loves to claim even divinity for itself by identifying itself with the Divine ! Many are the theories that assert that a spark of the Divine lies hidden somewhere within each of us as though genuine divinity were compatible with all the beastly elements in our nature like hatred, aggression, jealousy, spite and violence ! There is a widespread belief that an inviolable, immeasurable and timeless state exists which may somehow or other intervene and eliminate the *self* : the unseen hand of grace would wipe away the troublesome *self* for good. Now such an extraordinary state may or may not exist and one cannot be certain, but is it not far more important to discover the *reason* for the popularity of this belief than to adhere to this comforting belief? By believing in grace the mind derives a great deal of satisfaction and assurance ; this belief also helps to shift to an unknown source the responsibility for finding freedom from the *self*. Besides, of what value are beliefs anyway, even those pertaining to the elimination of the *self*, because sooner or later all beliefs get incorporated into the *self* and only result in strengthening and sustaining it?

Throughout the ages, by means of various ascetic practices, disciplines, vows and the subjugation of the thought process (miscalled "meditation"), man has endeavoured to find supreme Enlightenment. The story of man's spiritual journey is a pitiful record of his endless efforts, painful struggles and the ceaseless exercise of his will. The resolution "I will be that" is necessarily in opposition to "I will not be that" : the action of one's will is directly determined by the way in which one's mind has been conditioned . The hidden power behind will is the conditioned mind : in other words, will is the manifestation of the *self*. Any exercise of will is necessarily an assertion of the *self*. Thus in trying to extricate himself from psychological bondage, involving as it inevitably did the operation of will, man succeeded not in dissolving the *self* but in fortifying it !

The *self* is in its element when it is expressing itself through the exercise of will, effort or volition. The *self* jubilantly welcomes opportunities for struggling and striving so that it can become bigger and stronger; the *self* loves to grow, expand and consolidate its shaky foundations. Hence it is not difficult to understand why all those various systems, methods and techniques of so-called meditation have always been eagerly practised. Whenever the stream of consciousness is interfered with, regardless of whether that interference takes the form of repression or thought control, the agency that is guiding and directing these activities is no other than the *power-hungry self*. Thus through its ingenious involvement in the becoming process, the *self* begins to grow from strength to strength.

When a supposedly religious person "practises virtue", is not the *self* cunningly manifesting itself under the guise of goodness and love, just like the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing ? The *self* is the epitome of all that is low, mean, wicked and vicious within ourselves. The *self* is the devil that dwells within us. Can love and the *self* coexist, for are they not mutually exclusive ?

If the *self* were stripped of its various attributes and component parts, would it exist any more ? It is this fear of being reduced to extinction or nothingness that compels the

self to engage itself in all manner of religious, social, political and other activities whereby it acquires that feeling of pulsating with life and vigour. It is the *self* which circumscribes life by investing it with a particular aim or purpose.

On account of its essentially illusory character and precarious existence, the *I* tries extremely hard to ensure its survival by resorting to many tricks and deceptions. As the *self* is a non-entity in fact, being nothing more than a mere creation of our deranged imagination, it craves to become an everlasting entity. So it attempts indirectly to acquire for itself a degree of importance by identifying itself with groups of persons such as the family, race, caste, political party, religious sect, nation and so forth.

The *self* tries to be conspicuous in society by attaching itself to numerous noble and worthy causes. When a politician, for instance, champions the rights of the oppressed and the down-trodden, it is invariably the case that he is also pursuing in a roundabout way his own personal glory. By identifying itself with good works, the *self* wraps around itself the garb of social recognition, approval and respectability.

The *self's* seemingly insatiable appetite for power, position and prestige gives rise to the creation of a social hierarchy and the snobbishness that urges one to improve one's status within its ranks. How few are content to lead anonymous lives !

The *self* has a relish for *self-assertion*. Those who do it seldom acknowledge that the imposition of their ideas, beliefs, opinions and attitudes on others is also a form of *self-assertion*. The missionary who proselytises the heathen is only indulging in the foisting of his petty *ego* on the minds of helpless people. In the same manner, some of the crudest examples of *self-assertion* are those terrible acts of physical assault, aggression and violence that cause so much suffering. Do peacemakers realise that social violence is directly attributable to the nature of the *self*?

The genesis of countless conflicts between countries and bloody wars entailing the loss of lives and human suffering can all be directly traced to the restrictive and aggressive workings of the *I*.

The *self* is the source of all individual and social evil because the *self* can only function *selfishly*; it cannot act otherwise because altruism is alien to the fundamental character of the *self*.

The most divisive factor that separates otherwise harmoniously-related people is the unavoidable antagonism that arises from the *self-originated* hostile sense of *mine* versus *thine* or *ours* versus *yours*. What a marvellous paradise the world would be if the minds of all its inhabitants were cured of the cancer of the *self*! If that were to happen, the compelling need for the identification of the *self* with any particular race, sect, religion or nation would no longer be felt; no longer would people think and feel in terms of *my country* and *my race* but would rather behave peacefully as genuine citizens of the world. When the conflicts and clashes of *self-interest* between *my property* and *your property* end, all the abundant resources of our earth can be jointly shared by all in a new spirit of genuine universal brotherhood. It may seem rather far-fetched but it is nonetheless absolutely true that the elimination of the *self* is the primary requisite for the elimination of the pettiness of racism and nationalism, the ravages of war as well as the great suffering that is caused by abject poverty.

The greatest breakthrough in human history will happen, if it ever does, when man abandons the *self* once and for all and thereby ushers into the world a new era of spirituality.

Self-obsessed though we are, there are however those lovely, rare and precious moments in our lives when the *self* is *temporarily* absent. Given below are a few instances when the *self* was in abeyance.

While climbing the snow-covered Alps in Switzerland, the writer suddenly and unexpectedly beheld a scene of such touching beauty in the far distance that for a moment there was a complete suspension of the *self*. The machinery of the mind with its ceaseless chatter came to a standstill. During those fleeting seconds of *self-forgetfulness* what occupied the mind so fully was *only* the majestic spectacle of a gigantic, sweeping waterfall amidst the green and luxuriant pines.

Sometimes while being fast asleep at night one suddenly wakes up and finds oneself in a state of thoughtless blankness. Then for a few seconds while being in that free, untrammelled and rootless state, wherein the *self* is not in operation at all, one does not really know where one is or what one is doing or even who one is; this may be described as a state of *self-forgetfulness*, too, wherein one feels rather uneasy for the mind seems to have accidentally lost its stable and secure bearings. But before long the prevalence of certain thoughts, such as "Ah, I am lying down on a mattress" and "I am in Adelaide now and not in London or Colombo", help one to establish one's bearings and so the process of the *self* is reborn.

Once when the writer was on the verge of being fatally knocked down by a passing car on the road, the mind was so stunned that its ratiocinative activities stopped and the *self* disappeared for a while. The consequent clarity of mind made one so intensely aware of the danger that the body responded quickly and spontaneously by immediately jumping aside from the moving vehicle.

After capturing a fleeting glimpse of that blissful state of *no-self*, the mind tends greedily to record an impression of it which then becomes part and parcel of consciousness. Because the acquisitive mind starts cherishing that memory there naturally arises a longing to experience that state again and again. Nostalgia is the bane of the mind. As the mind failed to renew itself by dying to that remarkable experience and thereby dropping it once and for all, it now finds itself far less open to the possibility of once again entering that extraordinary dimension of *no-self*.

Those periods of heightened sensitivity and creativity that emanate when the *self* has ceased to operate, and which owe their origin to certain extraneous and accidental circumstances as already described, are very few and far between; besides, they are, in any case, very short-lived. Therefore, in conclusion, it is necessary to reiterate the truth that *it is only by fully understanding the deceitful intricacies of the self that its total elimination can take place.*

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE DHARMA ?

*"In the same way as the mighty ocean, O monks,
has one taste — the taste of salt,
even so, O monks, this Teaching and Discipline
has one taste — the taste of Liberation"*

Vinaya ii 239

The aforementioned words wonderfully encapsulate the essential aim of the Dharma. It is all well and good that the sublime teachings are spreading far and wide, especially in the West, but it would be a great pity if they are seen purely as a source of idle intellectual stimulation.

It had become common among certain philosophers to indulge in vain speculations about the nature of the Absolute and other matters. But the Buddha discouraged such speculation, particularly because it served no useful purpose. The Buddha categorically refused to express an opinion when Potthapada confronted him with the Ten Indeterminates :

1. Is the world eternal ?
2. Is the world not eternal ?
3. Is the world infinite ?
4. Is the world not infinite ?
5. Is the soul the same as the body ?
6. Is the soul different from the body ?
7. Is there an afterlife ?
8. Is there no afterlife ?

9. Does one both live again and not live again ?
10. Does one neither live again nor not live again ?

Such questions, said the Buddha, are neither concerned with the Truth nor do they contribute to right conduct, detachment, purification and tranquillity. They do not lead to Enlightenment.

Did the sage react evasively to Potthapada's questions because he did not know the answers himself ? Probably, as he said, he regarded it an utter waste of precious time and energy to become involved in problems that are beyond the comprehension of the limited human intellect. These problems, if ever solved, may perhaps make the solver a more knowledgeable person but not necessarily wiser nor morally superior. It was not that the Buddha was opposed to contemplation, for he himself had forsaken the comforts of a princely life to lead a contemplative one. What moved him at that time to take that step was certainly not a sterile intellectual curiosity that lacked seriousness and personal involvement. On the contrary, he had been consumed with a burning passion to unravel the mystery of suffering, its origin and nature as well as its total elimination. When the house is on fire, why bother to speculate about how the fire began, when one's only concern should be its immediate ending ? On account of this attitude he naturally frowned upon all philosophical questions that had no relevance to ultimate Emancipation.

Evidently the Buddha knew much more than what he chose to teach. What he expounded was only a small fragment of his vast understanding. It would have been very interesting for posterity had he expressed his views on a greater variety of topics but he wisely confined his teachings only to the fundamental issue of spiritual freedom. On one occasion when he was staying in the Simsapa Grove he held a few simsapa leaves in his hand and asked :

"Brothers, which are more numerous, the leaves that I hold or those in the grove?"

He was answered with the comment that the leaves he was holding were very few in number in contrast to those in the grove. Thereupon he discoursed :

"Just so, brothers, the things I have revealed to you are few, very few, in comparison with those things which I have known and understand but not revealed to you ... I have revealed that there is sorrow everywhere, that desire is the cause of sorrow ... I have revealed only what is conducive to the perfect state, only what is concerned with the holy life, only what results in the cessation of bondage and leads to perfect calm, to perfect wisdom — Nirvana"

In the teachings of the Buddha there are no doctrinal dogmas that have to be blindly accepted, and which if unaccepted might result in excommunication and eternal damnation. There is also no provision for a central ecclesiastical authority with the right to determine whether a particular interpretation of the teaching is a heresy or otherwise.

There is no principle of Buddhism that is based on "Divine revelation" or "Divine decree". Only when the accuracy of a truth is verifiable by human intelligence does it become acceptable. Truth is its own proof. This scientific approach to spiritual investigation is one of the outstanding features of Buddhism; it is a characteristic that is all the more invaluable because rarely, almost never, is it found in other religious systems.

Theistic systems insist that man should demonstrate his utter subservience to God through sacrifice, prayer and worship (*puja*). In Buddhism, however, there is no God who expects to be appeased, praised or bribed in order to win favours from Him. What is the point of praying when no Divine Being exists to listen to our prayers? The onus is wholly on man to cleanse himself through and through of all traces of karma and thereby to realise Nirvana. Buddhist doctrine never urges man to reduce himself to a docile creature in fearful recognition of God's omnipotence but rather it emphasises the importance of hard work as a prelude to Enlightenment. Those who rely on

external aids become weaklings, whereas through absolute self-reliance one grows from strength to strength.

When the Buddha appealed to each individual *"to work out your salvation with diligence"*, he was obviously implying that salvation was well within the ken of human possibility; in other words, salvation can be found *unaided*, as he himself had done. Salvation is not a blessing conferred by God; it is the outcome of self-examination and meditation. But few are interested in exerting themselves in this manner. The vast majority would much rather find comfort and consolation in beliefs and dogmas that promise an easy "salvation" vicariously, such as the belief that Jesus redeemed the sins of all mankind through his crucifixion.

To regard the Buddha as "the Saviour of the World" is to do him a great injustice, for nothing is more alien to his teaching than the expectation to be liberated through the instrumentality of another. Are we not our own saviours? If a Supreme Being has the power to grant salvation, then by the same token it can also be withdrawn. But Nirvana is beyond the karmic chain of cause and effect : it is causeless in the sense that it can neither be given by one person to another nor taken away by any person.

The Buddha eschewed all forms of dependence and stressed the importance of self-reliance . If his words in the *Maha Parinibbana Sutta* were taken seriously, it is incumbent upon man to free himself of the desire to be helped by gurus, priests and intercessors :

"Be lamps unto yourselves. Be a refuge to yourselves. Resort to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast to the Truth as a refuge. Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourselves."

Today we have become very knowledgeable about various subjects. Modern man is constantly bombarded with information but our understanding of ourselves tends to be superficial. In the days of the Buddha the men and women who questioned him were probably less learned than ourselves, but they were,

judging by their searching and subtle questions, much more keen on discovering the eternal verities than we are nowadays. Somehow their enthusiasm for spiritual emancipation had a certain intensity that is rare in the modern world. Anyone who studies the discourses and dialogues of the Buddha gets that impression.

In a good many discourses of the Buddha his listeners were to a large extent forest dwelling monks who led austere lives. Often these reclusive renunciants wore simple robes composed of pieces of cloth and discarded rags. With great humility they begged for food. Avoiding the joys of social contact, these monks devoted their lives for the purpose of carrying out a thorough search of their minds and in the process weeding out all that was impure from within themselves.

Monks who are socially detached have more time and energy to explore the inner workings of the psyche than those who are socially engaged.

What is the principal objective of the Dharma? Those who familiarise themselves with the Dharma will soon see the supreme importance of removing all the barriers to Nirvana. That of course will not be easy. Overcoming the obstacles is a matter that is more easily said than done. One can free oneself from all the taints by self-purifying self-observation. We need to purge ourselves of our heavy burden of psychological tendencies of which many taints have transferred themselves from our previous lives to the current one.

The Dharma clearly describes the basic barriers. What are they? We have become trapped by the tentacles of greed or craving (*lobha*), hatred and anger (*dosa*) and the mind-deluding darkness of the "I" (*moha*). Whether or not we are renunciants, we must somehow manage to wrench ourselves free from these karmic forces. This is the biggest challenge of our lives.

THE BELIEF IN A CREATOR-GOD

Creationists believe that out of nothing a transcendent God created the entire universe, including matter and the various forms of life. All and everything, they maintain, was produced *ex nihilo* by this Being. The story of Creation as given in *Genesis* starts with "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..." It is necessary to ask what was there *before* the beginning since the latter has been posited, and we may even by the same token ask "what will be there *after* the end" should anyone posit that there is an ending to the universe. Can there ever be a beginning or an end to time? Theologians try to get round the problem by creating the ingenious concept that God is the First Cause. Be that as it may, one can see that creationists are prepared to go to any lengths to justify their *attachment* to the belief in God. This fact is of great psychological significance.

The doctrine of creation has been differently expressed over many centuries with interesting variations. The cosmos, for example, was created by a Divine Being, Spirit or principle out of pre-existing matter. The unshakeable belief in a Creator-God is *central* to all creationist dogma, which is psychologically noteworthy.

One can ceaselessly speculate about how man and the universe came into existence. But who could be absolutely sure of knowing how it all actually happened? If perchance we manage to acquire this special knowledge, does it necessarily follow that we will for that reason attain Liberation?

Some years ago I went through a theistic phase. During this short-lived episode I discovered that I was unusually happy and

always cheerful because of my commitment and dedication to an invisible Father, a sheer invention of my imagination, in whom I sincerely trusted. I was secure in the knowledge that His loving care was there at all times. I felt that I was insured against all earthly catastrophes. It was so nice to take refuge in Big Daddy. It was, in retrospect, refuge in delusion!

The Buddha declared that

"As far, monks, as this thousandfold world system extends, Mahabrahma ranks there as the highest. But even for Mahabrahma change takes place, transformation takes place. When seeing this, monks, an instructed noble disciple is repelled by it; being repelled, he becomes dispassionate towards the highest, not to speak of what is low"

Anguttara Nikaya x 29

Realising the ephemeral nature of life, observing how everything passes away like the early morning mist, man has always had a certain secret longing for something that is changeless, indestructible and immortal. This is the psychological explanation for the genesis of the idea of God. If what we reverentially regard as the Absolute is also subject to decay and change, like any mortal man, woman or child, then it follows that poor Mahabrahma is himself impermanent. The law of universal impermanence is the very crux of Buddhist teaching. Besides, why feel *attachment* for Mahabrahma, or any deity for that matter, knowing jolly well that none of them is everlasting? This question of impermanence has been a constant headache for many a theist. In order to circumvent this difficulty theists have cleverly argued that the Almighty is without beginning or end, thus ascribing eternity to their mentally created Creator-God. When theists speculate about God they seldom see that they are acting pretentiously, for has the finite mind the capacity for probing the Infinite?

The biblical assertion that God created man in His own image is pure conjecture at best, whereas in truth it is man's mind that constantly creates and recreates God in his own human image, based primarily on his pressing need for

psychological security in a changeable insecure world. The ego constantly craves for permanence and stability because of its precariously illusory existence.

There is a fascinating account of the origin of the belief in a Creator-God in the *Brahmajala Sutta* (*Digha Nikaya*).

Is the belief in a Creator-God of any value? The Buddha gives us a real insight into this matter in the following statement:

I approached those ascetics and brahmins ... and said to them : "Is it true, as they say, that you venerable ones teach and hold the view that whatever a person experiences ... all that is caused by God's creation?"

When they affirmed it, I said to them : "If that is so, venerable sirs, then it is due to God's creation that people kill ... and hold false views. But those who have recourse to God's creation as the decisive factor will lack the impulse and effort for doing this or not doing that. Since they have no real valid ground for asserting that this or that ought to be done or ought not to be done, the term 'ascetics' does not rightly apply to them, living without mindfulness and self-control"

Anguttara Nikaya iii 61

Is God deserving of devotion, given the appalling injustices and terrible sufferings in this so-called marvellous world? Is He worthy of worship, given the fact that "acts of God" such as earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters are all agonisingly painful?

When for their salvation people foolishly rely upon a Creator-God, if He exists at all, are they not unknowingly and unnecessarily prolonging their period of samsaric entanglement, especially because their efforts and energies get diverted away to an external source? Instead of self-reliantly purifying themselves as a necessary prelude to Enlightenment, why seek out an Outer God who is, by all accounts, very revengeful and quite wicked, hence urgently in need of purification Himself? Spiritual aspirants who turn to God are surely going in the wrong direction. Must not our spiritual quest always progress *inwards but never outwards*?

Because of their confusion theists are comparable to homeless refugees who in desperation take shelter in the Lord's mansion, not realising that both God and His dwelling place exist nowhere except in their fertile imagination, but those who are self-reliant and hence truly intelligent will never make that mistake. There is nothing better than being supremely awake; for a mind that shines like a lamp and is therefore a source of spiritual light, is less prone to deception. Such truly independent persons, who have awakened their latent intelligence, need no guidance as they are no longer in the clutches of the forces of darkness. Besides, those who have lit the inner lamp of constant mindfulness or awareness soon discover that they do not need any extraneous lamp, so they cannot be fooled by so-called prophets who say that they are the spokesmen for the Lord. People who believe in God are easily exploited by those who claim to represent the Divine.

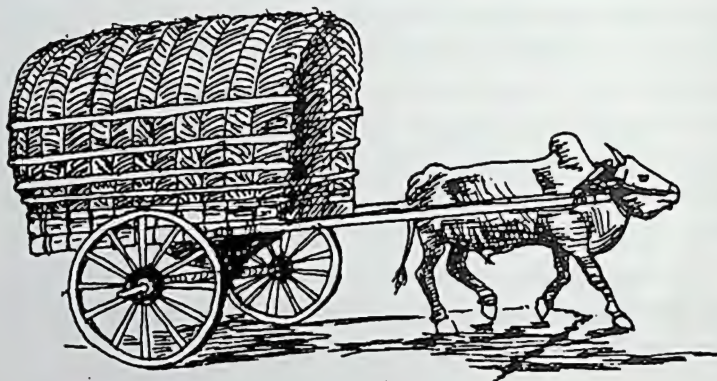
During the last days of the Buddha he advised his favourite disciple Ananda to be utterly self-reliant. There is a moving account in the *Maha Parinibbana Sutta* :

"Ananda, you must live like islands unto yourselves, regarding yourself as your own refuge, seeing the Dhamma as an island, it is your sole refuge. A monk lives like an island unto himself by contemplating the body as body, being aware and mindful, discarding the desire for the world. Those who live like that will become the highest beings"

Children love toys. Girls enjoy playing with dolls and boys are given toy soldiers. Kids naturally tend to view these playthings as their close companions and even a brief separation from their friends becomes unpleasant. Some children cannot fall asleep unless they are clutching their teddy bears, which helps to lull them into a false sense of security. As a rule children outgrow their earlier passion for toys. But even in their adult lives it often happens that theists and learned theologians, suffering as they do from isolation and loneliness, find it difficult to drop their deep *attachment* to a giant Teddy Bear of a God with the result that there is in them hardly any spiritual unfoldment.

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10

WHY BELIEVE IN GOD ?

*"...It is in this fathom-long body,
Along with its perceptions and thoughts
That I describe the world,
The origin of the world,
The ending of the world
And the way leading to that ending"*

Anguttara Nikaya iv 46

Of the many beliefs that man has cherished from time immemorial, the belief in God has always been particularly sacrosanct. Religiously inclined persons go to the extent of maintaining that the only worthwhile action in life is the pursuit of that which they consider sacred. They view every other interest as being secondary to the search for, and worship of, God. This belief in a deity has taken various forms of expression throughout the ages, ranging from the worship of crude idols by primitive man, to the adoration by certain modern theologians and philosophers of highly refined concepts of God. The word "God" is used here in a very wide sense, including such deities as those of the Hindu pantheon. It is clearly beyond the scope of this essay to examine all those metaphysical controversies that have centred around the idea of God. *This inquiry is mainly concerned with uncovering the psychological foundations of the belief in God, especially since man's preoccupation with such an ineffable force, vaguely called the Divine, has frequently bordered on the pathological.*

Some of the *Mahavakyas* (Great Sayings) from the *Upanishads* suggest that something of the Divine inheres in us all :

"Pure consciousness is God"———*Prajanam Brahma*

Aitareya Upanishad

"I am God"———*Aham Brahmasmi*

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

"Thou art That"———*Tat tvam asi*

Chandogya Upanishad

"The soul is God"———*Ayam atma Brahma*

Mandukya Upanishad

According to these famous maxims of Hinduism, the individual is not separate from the Divine but part and parcel of it. Generally speaking, scholars have got themselves entangled in futile controversies concerning the esoteric and philosophical meanings of these aphorisms. Intellectual speculation often becomes an all-absorbing pastime. But the present discussion is primarily directed towards unravelling the psychological implications of the concept that the Divine principle or essence can be found within ourselves.

How is one going to find out whether God is actually residing within this house of body and mind? One cannot possibly trust the assertions of sacred books, because they may all be mistaken; nor can one rely on spiritual authorities because they may be harbouring delusions. One naturally falls back on one's own mind, but that very instrument of inquiry is not infallible either. The mind is burdened by the weight of traditions and countless influences with the result that it is not free : its very composition inevitably distorts right perception. As there seems to be no way out of this quandary, one is impelled to ask a fundamental question : Is the mind, which is finite, ever capable of comprehending the Infinite? It would seem that the conditioned mind, so long as it remains enmeshed in conditioning, can never rightly answer such a question.

The theory that God is already within us is based on the assumption that the Divine can coexist harmoniously with the mind, which is the very antithesis of the Divine. Can the Divine

even be invited by the mind, let alone dwell within its structure? For the mind, with all its animalistic vestiges of hatred and violence, is saturated with selfishness. Is purity compatible with impurity? Is light compatible with darkness? Can the mind be both free and unfree simultaneously? Has not the "I" sought its own glory by claiming for itself the companionship of the Divine? To believe that one is Godlike, despite all one's limitations, is the highest form of self-flattery.

Each person's concept of God is circumscribed by the particular limitations of his imagination. The learned imagine God in highly abstract terms, whereas the unlettered visualise Him as a simple benevolent being. The poets, with their inventive imagination, naturally conceive God in grandiose terms. Rather than acknowledge the impossibility of conceiving the inconceivable, man has made the mistake of anthropomorphizing God. The writers of the *Old Testament*, for instance, naively attributed to God human qualities, such as anger and revenge : "*The Lord will not forgive such a man. Instead, the Lord's burning anger will flame up against him, and all the disasters written in this book will fall on him until the Lord has destroyed him completely*" (*Deuteronomy 29 : 20*). Incidentally, how can God, who is prone to such wrath and violence, be compassionate at the same time? Has God a schizophrenic dual personality?

The concept of God in *The New Testament*, in contrast, reveals man's craving for a protective parental figure who is caring and kind : "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4 : 8). Infants cry when deprived of loving care. This yearning to be loved is carried over into adulthood. This idea of an all-merciful Father in Heaven helps to assuage this deep-seated psychological need. How man's psychological needs are projected upon poor God ! Throughout history man has tailored his vision of God in accordance with his self-image. So the God invented by the imagination became a faithful reflection of man himself. In view of the fact that the universe is governed by definite laws and principles, some men of science have strangely surmised that God is a pure mathematician. Do animals have beliefs? If donkeys were

imaginative, they, too, would similarly imagine a God that resembles a donkey, complete with four legs, two long ears and a tail as well!

Because theists have been conditioned by the notion that everything should have a beginning, they have jumped to the facile conclusion that the universe, too, had a definite beginning at some point in time. The creationist school regards all matter and living forms as the marvellous handiwork of God, originating in His benevolence. If everything has an origin, then, logically, the Creator, too, must have had a beginning. That raises an interesting question : Who created the Creator ? Is it the case, on the other hand, that He is devoid of ancestry ? This is a challenging question that must be asked. Theists conveniently underestimate the seriousness of this issue by offering the plausible theory that God was the First Cause. On the other hand, the unsatisfactoriness of this explanation becomes obvious in the light of the following questions : Did time and space suddenly commence with that First Cause ? What existed *before* the First Cause ? Who, or, what, anyway, was responsible for the existence of the First Cause ? Did God mysteriously spring into being out of nothingness ? Besides, more fundamentally, can true nothingness ever give rise to something ? One can spend a lifetime speculating about the origin of the universe, but in the end, would one not still be in the dark ? The point is that we really do not know the origin of matter. Does it not require an extraordinary degree of honesty to admit frankly that one is ignorant, instead of pretending to knowledge, as the vast majority of theists unfortunately do ?

Shifting our attention from the realm of religious beliefs to that of science, the Big Bang theory has gained some popularity in astronomical circles. Billions of years ago all matter underwent a tremendous explosion and the galaxies started to move outwardly. But, in a fresh cycle, the universe will start contracting again. This process of exploding and contracting will continue *ad infinitum*. Yet, the Big Bang explanation, at best, remains an hypothesis. Does anyone know with absolute certainty how the universe actually came into

being ? Man may never find out the answer. Religious beliefs are founded upon, and gain their sustenance from, our *psychological needs*. Scientific theories, in contrast, at least have the merit that they have to be, and often are, substantiated by convincing evidence.

What is the psychology of explaining ? Explanations, whether scientifically based or otherwise, are particularly endearing to the psyche which, by its very nature, always seeks havens of security. The swiftly moving and ever-changing thought process provides no stable foundation for the mind; on the contrary, it generates an unsettling feeling of insecurity. It is disconcerting to realise that not only the outside world, but also the inner world of consciousness, is in a state of perpetual flux. Given this situation, it is understandable why the mind desperately desires to cling to explanations. Explanations become the anchors of stability for the mind, which is constantly tossed about in the stormy sea of thought. Explanations, as it were, "iron out" perplexing problems and thereby assure the restless mind some sense of restful security. Explanations help to "clear up" all lurking doubts and assist the mind to enjoy some sense of achievement. What is most dangerous in explanations is that they contribute to a false sense of clarity. The mind is led to believe that it has gained deep insight through its attachment to an explanation, when the contrary might well be the case. Therefore, having "understood" through an explanation, the mind tends arrogantly to desist from inquiring any further. Then, since the spirit of inquiry has been stifled, the sense of wonder and curiosity which makes learning possible, also gets destroyed.

For many persons the belief in God is a handy peg to hang upon all their failings and shortcomings in life. I used to know a Christian clergyman in London who was very fond of shoplifting. Although he was a man of means, he was engaged in the forbidden activity of petty thieving for "the sheer excitement of not getting caught." When I asked him how he reconciled his criminal behaviour with his religious principles, he confessed, "I can't help stealing. That's the way I was made."

What an explanation ! This gentleman craftily used his belief in God to disclaim personal responsibility for his actions. He was implying that the question of mending his ways was a matter outside his individual control. Now, what happens to a person who is intelligent enough to sever his links completely with the idea of God ? He immediately realises that he alone is responsible for his actions. He no longer blames his imaginary Almighty for his own selfish character traits. God ceases to be made into a scapegoat. This changed focus of attention, which is inward-looking instead of outward-looking, awakens in the mind a new quality of self-reliance, which in turn kindles a passion for investigation into the hitherto unknown personality traits, attitudes and hidden inclinations of the mind.

If it is the case that the mystery of God can never be comprehended by the intellect, then is not that mystery being vitiated whenever God is reduced to a mere concept, abstraction or definition ? Every time a theologian or philosopher attempts to describe God in terms of an idea, is he not trying to describe the indescribable ? Is he not also trying to restrict something that is immeasurably vast within the confines of thought ?

One of the biggest impediments to the total liberation of the psyche from all forms of conditioning is the fact that the mind continues to retain so many so-called sacred epithets concerning the nature of the Absolute. It has been estimated that the *Koran* itself has 99 different names for Allah or God, not to mention the numerous descriptive names found in other religious traditions. One such name from the *Koran* is *Al-'Alim* (the All-Knowing). Why should one assume that the Absolute is omniscient ? Besides, there is no point in praying and petitioning God to remove one's problems, obstacles and sufferings because the so-called All-Knowing One should already know about one's grievances.

Why should one believe, as the Christians do, that the Absolute has the attribute of omnipotence ? Does the mind with a sense of power find God, or one that is selfless and non-assertive ? The ego has an insatiable desire for power and glory.

The illusory "I" likes to assert its importance constantly by exercising power. With a power-hungry mind, man speculates about God. Therefore, needless to say, although his concept of God may be subtle or sophisticated, it is inevitably nothing more than a refined replica of his own crude craving for power. Not surprisingly, therefore, he pronounces that God is "omnipotent"! God is given a name that savours of power! Again and again one notices that the characteristics attributed to God are closely and directly related to our own psychological needs.

Has not man vainly given names to that which is probably nameless? Has he not insulted God by attaching to God his own petty labels? Therefore, is it not a sane solution to this problem for the mind to remain in a state of absolute blankness on this question of the Absolute?

The atheist who denies the existence of God is no less dogmatic than the theist who asserts the existence of God. Both have taken settled ideological positions. Some atheistic freethinkers — incidentally, is thinking ever *free*? — like to regard themselves as being more clear-sighted than their theistic counterparts, quite oblivious to the fact that their commitment to the negative belief that God is non-existent, is psychologically not at all different from the theists' commitment to the positive belief that God exists.

Jews, Christians and Muslims, not excluding some Hindus, sincerely believe that God is a permanent resident of Heaven. The spiritual aspiration of every theist is to go to Heaven and meet God and thereby get to know the fellow personally. Good luck!

All beliefs, be they of a negative or a positive nature, must necessarily restrict the free operation of the mind. Beliefs colour our outlook and prevent the direct and undistorted perception of *Reality*. Now, after rejecting both the theistic and atheistic positions, the mind finds itself lost for a while, but the state of uncertainty soon ends when it next gets drawn to the agnostic view that God is *unknowable*. But seldom is it realised that even this position is based on an assumption in the sense

that this standpoint is without proof. How can anyone postulate that God is unknowable? God *may* be knowable, after all, by transcending the frontiers of the mind. Hence the mind that is cautious enough to avoid being ensnared by any such rigid positions, honestly admits that it is ignorant about God. Therefore it says "*I do not know.*"

A view that has gained popularity in certain esoteric Christian circles is that *God is silence*. God may or may not be a state of silence: I do not know. Can anyone be pretty sure about that? But when the mind declares that God is silence, is the mind being silent, or is it not once again continuing in its seemingly endless habit of commenting on this, that and the other? The mind is such a ceaseless chatterbox! The moment the mind posits that "God is this ..." or "God is that ...", or anything else, is there not a turning away from the very silence that it is vainly trying to describe?

It is only *after* a period of silence, short-lived or otherwise, that the mind becomes cognisant that it had been silent. For the very moment the mind recognises its own silence, does it not thereby reactivate the dormant thought process, and thus terminate its silence? Can the mind recognise its silence and remain quiet at the same time?

It is not suggested in the least that the silent mind is incapable of thinking or that it does not think at all. On the contrary, only the silent mind can think clearly and logically as its perception is neither distorted nor blinded by prejudices and intervening images. Such a mind uses thought, when it is necessary to do so, but it is not enslaved by thought. Thought is its docile slave, not its domineering master. The still mind is always free of any residuary psychological memories. Like a pendulum that swings to and fro but unfailingly returns to equilibrium, the still mind may engage itself in thought, but ever returns to tranquillity; thus it remains uncontaminated by any form of conditioning.

In the light of what we have discussed here, let us reconsider the age-old question: What is God? A mind that is full of the immensity of silence will never react to this question in the

manner of a conditioned mind. In fact, a still mind will not react at all, as it is devoid of psychological background, which is the springboard from which all reacting takes place. Therefore, a quiet mind will never seek an answer because all searching activates the thought process with its incessant movement. The tranquil mind *lives* with the question, instead of trying to dispose of it in a thousand different ways — through ideas, explanations, beliefs or suppositions. Then, the question itself will partake of that silence.



THE BUDDHA'S CONVERSATION WITH A FARMER

The Buddha conversed with a farmer called Kasibharadvaja in a friendly and informal way. This farmer was not a simple-minded peasant but a Brahmin with a thoughtful turn of mind. He did not hesitate to speak with the Buddha in a challenging manner, yet his attitude to the Master was one of deference as we shall see.

The Buddha was in residence at Dakkhinagiri (monastery) in the Brahmanic village of Ekanala in Magadha. As it was the sowing season Kasibharadvaja was putting to use as many as five hundred ploughs. Such was the rural setting wherein a memorable event happened. In the latter part of the morning the Buddha, having dressed himself, took his begging bowl and outer robe. Next he went to the area where Kasibharadvaja's work was taking place. It was the time when food was being distributed. After going there, the Buddha was standing at one side. Noticing the presence of the Buddha who was waiting for alms, Kasibharadvaja started speaking with him. Kasibharadvaja said, "O monk, I plough and sow, and after such ploughing and sowing, I eat. You also, O monk, must plough and sow, and after having done that, you should eat."

Some might say that the farmer's uncalled-for outburst shows nothing but disrespect for the Buddha. Others might add that it is best to ignore these rude remarks which imply that the Enlightened One was a social parasite who failed to earn an honest living. In this connection one is reminded of a statement in the Bible which sounds somewhat cold and harsh :

"If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3 : 10). While speaking in the same vein, Kasibharadvaja was indirectly indicating that only those who plough and sow have a right to eat.

"O Brahmin," replied the Buddha, "*I also plough and sow, and after having ploughed and sown, I eat.*"

"We don't see," retorted the Brahmin, "the Venerable Gotama's yoke, plough, ploughshare, goad or oxen. Yet the Venerable Gotama says 'I also plough and sow, and after having ploughed and sown, I eat.' You claim to be a ploughman," argued the Brahmin, "yet we don't see your plough ! Tell us about your ploughing so that we may know about it."

Thereupon the Buddha declared in verse :

*"My seed is faith,
My rain is austerity,
My yoke and plough are wisdom,
My plough's pole is modesty,
My strap is the mind,
My ploughshare and goad are mindfulness.
Restrained in speech and conduct,
Self-controlled in food,
With truth I cut the weeds.
My liberation is compassion.
My beast of burden is exertion.
Without turning back, it carries me to Nirvana
Where one does not suffer.
Thus ploughed, the fruit of Immortality is produced
And one is free of pain of all kinds."*

Then Kasibharadvaja, after presenting the Buddha with a golden bowl filled with milk-rice, said, "May the Buddha eat this offering of milk-rice. The Venerable Buddha is a ploughman indeed whose ploughing results in the fruit of Immortality."

Refusing to accept the gift, the Buddha said :

"That which is gained by reciting verses I should not eat. This, O Brahmin, is not the practice of those with clarity of mind. The Buddha rejects what is acquired by reciting verses. Such is the conduct of the Buddhas as long as the Dharma (i.e. the teaching) lasts."

What can we deduce from the foregoing statement of the Enlightened One ? It is obviously not right to receive anything in exchange for the Dharma. The Dharma should neither be regarded nor used as a marketable commodity. *Never* should the Dharma be bought or sold. On the contrary, it is incumbent on all lovers of the Dharma to make it available for one and all free of charge.

"You should serve other food and drink," said the Buddha, "to an accomplished great sage who is free of craving and misbehaviour, because this is the field of a person who is looking for good works."

"Venerable Gotama, to whom then shall I offer this milk-rice?" asked Kasibharadvaja.

"O Brahmin, in the world of men and gods and Maras and Brahmans, comprising of gods and men, and monks and Brahmins, there is none who can eat and digest this milk-rice, unless he were the Buddha or a disciple of his. Therefore, O Brahmin, you must throw away this milk-rice where there is little grass, or empty it into water without worms."

Accordingly the Brahmin threw the food away, casting it onto water devoid of worms. No sooner had he thrown it than the water splashed, hissed and steamed in volumes. Frightened and worried, Kasibharadvaja threw himself down reverentially at the Buddha's feet and exclaimed, "It is wonderful, O Venerable Gotama ! It is wonderful, O Venerable Gotama ! As one lifts up what has fallen down, or reveals what has hitherto remained hidden, or shows the right road to one who has got lost, or being like a beacon by holding an oil lamp in the dark so that those with eyes may see, in the same manner and in many ways the Venerable Gotama has explained and made clear

the Dharma. I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha; I wish to be ordained as a monk — the novice's ordination and the higher ordination." He then received both ordinations from the Buddha.

This sutta illustrates that it would be very dangerous to accept anything gained by expounding the Dharma. In other words, those who teach the Dharma must never make a profit from it.

The Venerable Kasibharadvaja not only led a reclusive and solitary life but also one that was strenuous, enthusiastic and energetic. Before long by means of his own intelligence he attained Arhatship — the highest spiritual perfection in search of which people leave their homes and become homeless wanderers. He realised that "the cycle of births and deaths has ceased, the religious life has been led, what needs doing has been done, there is nothing else left to be done". Thus the Venerable Kasibharadvaja became one of the Arhats.

The extraordinary story of how this former farmer freed himself from all the fetters and found the final freedom known as Nirvana is an inspiration to us all who are unfortunately enmeshed in mundane misery. He swam the stormy sea of suffering called Samsara and reached the serene safety of the sacred shores of Nirvana.

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IN PRAISE OF A SOLITARY LIFE

Many are the monks, nuns, hermits, ascetics, yogis and mystics who have chosen to lead solitary lives for religious reasons. Some persons shun solitariness as they fear loneliness. The latter are so fond of the society of friends and relations that the very idea of living alone is anathema to them.

Right at the outset of this essay it is necessary to be clear about the distinction between "solitude" and "solitary life". The word "solitude" is often suggestive of the uneasy state of feeling lonely, forsaken and deserted. "Solitary life", though, has quite a different meaning. As a general rule only some people — only a small minority — are capable of leading solitary lives because of their detached attitude to worldly matters. Hence they prefer to spend their days in quiet places that are far removed from the exciting hurly-burly of city life. In this regard, we must pose several questions. Are those who pursue the passing pleasures of the world really happy, or do they simply imagine that they are leading happy lives? Do they bear the ups and downs of samsara with equanimity? Furthermore, are they any the closer to the cessation of the cycle of births and deaths?

A recluse who lives in a remote mountain cave might like to believe that his life is a solitary one merely because he has made himself inaccessible to the public, yet if his mind is preoccupied with earthly attachments, is he, strictly speaking, leading a solitary life? Once I met several forest-based saffron-robed "renunciants" who were heavily involved in politics! One monk confessed that he liked making money on the stock

market in order to finance the construction of a meditation centre ! But persons who are genuinely interested in leading solitary lives fall into two categories : first, those who have purified themselves of their defilements; second, those who are in the process of so purifying themselves in all seriousness.

One of my favourite Buddhist suttas is the *Khaggavisanasutta* of the *Suttanipata*. Therefore in my own words I have tried to restate as best I can all the 41 verses. I have done this enthusiastically. The profundity of this sutta is such that it deserves to be regarded as one of the great classics of religious literature.

In this sutta solitariness is likened to the horn of a rhinoceros. The enormously built Indian rhinoceros has a very prominent horn that is borne on the nose. The horn is about a foot in length. Somehow the horn seems rather separated from the rest of the animal's body. This sense of isolation is conveyed in the final words of every stanza — "one must be alone, like the horn of a rhinoceros".

*Cast aside the rod for punishment,
Hurt not any living being.
Crave neither for a son nor a friend.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 1)

*Intimate contacts with others
Result in affections, then pains ensue.
Affection leads to misery.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 2)

*He who has compassion for his friends
Fetters his own mind and ignores the goal.
Friendship is fraught with danger.*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 3)

*Like a big bamboo with entangled branches
One cares for wife and children.
But be like a bamboo shoot that does not cling.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 4)

*In the forest an unbound deer is free
To go anywhere and feed itself.
The wise, likewise, have liberty.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 5)

*Polite demands are constantly made
When in company with people.
But if desirelessness and liberty are sought
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 6)

*When friends gather there is fun and games
And much affection for children.
Although separation from friends is unpleasant
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 7)

*One should be relaxed anywhere,
Not unfriendly towards anyone,
Fearless and satisfied with anything.*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.
(verse 8)*

*There is discontent among some ascetics
And some householders as well.
Be indifferent to others' children.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.
(verse 9)*

*The marks of a householder are thrown away,
Like the leaves of a Kovilara that fall away.
Family ties one should bravely slay.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.
(verse 10)*

*If one finds a friend wise and bright
Who is good and morally right,
Defeat all dangers on sight,
Then walk together, in mindfulness take delight.
(verse 11)*

*If one finds not a friend wise and bright
Who is good and morally right,
As a defeated king gives up his might,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.
(verse 12)*

*Those with good friends are surely lucky.
Of friendships only the best are worthy.
If that is not a practical possibility*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 13)

*On an arm two golden bracelets fine,
Skilled work, they strike and shine.
See the jewels, then realise :*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 14)

*If with another I want to associate,
Useless talk with then take place.
On this risk one can meditate.*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 15)

*Sensual pleasures of various kinds,
Sweet or charming, disturb our minds.
In sensual pleasures misery thrives.*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 16)

*Sensual pleasures cause damage, destruction,
Bad luck and pains; illness, in addition.
See the danger in this sore situation.*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 17)

*Cold and heat, hunger and thirst,
Wind and sun, gadflies and snakes,
These things one first subjugates.*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 18)

*Like a forest elephant of size immense
That deserts its herd to commence
Its freedom to go from place to place,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 19)

*Even temporary release he cannot find
Who loves the company of mankind.
Ponder over the Buddha's words and mind.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 20)

*Philosophical views I have transcended,
Self-restrained, the way to perfection I have attained,
Unled by others, the light has dawned.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 21)

*Devoid of fraud, greed, desire, detraction,
Cleansed of passion and foolish action,
Free from wanting any worldly possession,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 22)

*Run away from a friend wicked,
Who likes to misguide and is crooked.
Avoid also the sensual-pleasure-oriented.*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*
(verse 23)

*Associate with a friend learned,
Wise Dharma adherer, high-minded,
Intelligent and clear-headed.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*
(verse 24)

*Love not sports, amusements, worldly pleasures,
Adornments for oneself and dresses.
Speak the truth at all times.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*
(verse 25)

*Sever all ties with son, parents, wife,
Kin, wealth and corn, all so nice.
Also abandon all desires in life.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*
(verse 26)

*"This is an obstacle, without much happiness,
Hardly any delight, more of distress,
A fish-hook," one sees with mindfulness.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*
(verse 27)

*After the obstacles are surmounted,
Like a net-encumbered fish been freed,
As fire never returning to what has burned,*

*One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 28)

*Eyes looking down, without prying to find,
With restrained senses, passion-free mind,
Lacking in lustful passions of any kind,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 29)

*The householder's marks he removes,
Like a coral tree stripped of leaves,
Homeless, the yellow-robed one moves.
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 30)

*Freed of greed for things sweet, and not unsteady,
No supporter of others, begs from everybody,
Without partiality for any family,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 31)

*Having overcome the Five Hindrances, *
Having abandoned all bad qualities,
Self-reliant, free from desires,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 32)

* (see below for explanatory notes relating to the Five Hindrances)

*With indifference to both pleasure and pain,
As well as joy and severe strain,*

Equanimity, tranquillity, purity are the gain.

One must be alone,

Like the horn of a rhinoceros.

(verse 33)

Strenuously strive for Enlightenment

Without having any attachment.

Work hard, be strong for highest Attainment.

One must be alone,

Like the horn of a rhinoceros.

(verse 34)

Continuing with meditation in isolation,

Always living the Dharma with devotion,

Seeing our sad samsaric situation,

One must be alone,

Like the horn of a rhinoceros.

(verse 35)

Keen on ensuring that craving has ended,

Be attentive, not silly, but learned,

Watchful, replete with energy and restrained.

One must be alone,

Like the horn of a rhinoceros.

(verse 36)

Like a lion by noise remaining undisturbed,

Like the wind in a net remaining uncaptured,

Like a lotus by water remaining unstained,

One must be alone,

Like the horn of a rhinoceros.

(verse 37)

Like a strong-toothed lion that all creatures

Defeats, king of animals that wins and goes

*To distant isolated dwelling places,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 38)

*At the right time having compassion,
Kindness, equanimity and liberation,
With rejoicing and without others' obstruction,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 39)

*Having overcome passion, aversion and delusion,
The fetters broken : it means their destruction,
Fearing not life's inevitable cessation,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 40)

*For self-interest people serve and seek society,
Selfless friends one finds with difficulty.
As men know self-profit and live impurely,
One must be alone,
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.*

(verse 41)

The refrain of this sutta "*One must be alone, like the horn of a rhinoceros*" has sometimes been interestingly translated as "*let one wander alone like a rhinoceros*". The word "wanderer" conjures up various images. First, the greatest wanderer was the Buddha who wandered in central India over a long period of forty-five years, giving expression to those timeless truths that we treasure, which are collectively called the Dharma; second, it highlights the monk's austere life of homeless insecurity wherein, braving the elements, he has to beg for food for survival; third, it reminds one of the need to be attentive to the mind's tendency

to wander aimlessly around its various cravings, for such attention is really a very important aspect of meditation; finally, regardless of whether one is a monk, in a sense every human being is a wanderer who has got caught up in the sorrowful cycle of countless births, deaths and rebirths. Therefore, not allowing our attention to wander outwards, we can observe the inner world of the psyche with all its pride, prejudices, preoccupations and predilections for this, that or the other. Watching how the restless mind of the "I"-centred wanderer is given to wandering is itself a form of meditation.

* THE FIVE HINDRANCES

The following five hindrances or Nivarnas are sometimes described as defilements or obstacles which indeed they are. These hindrances get in the way of undistorted mental perception. They have the effect of blinding the mind. They also adversely affect our powers of concentration.

Sensuous Desire (Kamacchanda)

Overcoming this obstacle results in a pure heart that is free of sensuality.

Ill-will (Vyapada)

Overcoming this obstacle results in a pure heart that is free of ill-will wherein love and compassion for all beings will blossom.

Sloth and Torpor (Thina-middha)

Overcoming this obstacle (sloth = laziness ; torpor = apathy or lack of zeal) results in a watchful mind wherein consciousness is characterised by clarity.

Restlessness and Worry (Uddhacca-kukkucca)

Overcoming this obstacle results in an undisturbed mind and a peaceful heart.

Sceptical Doubt (Vicikiccha)

Overcoming this obstacle results in the disappearance of doubts relating to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. This hindrance also relates to uncertainty whether things are

wholesome or otherwise, and the lack of eagerness to think things out and come to a conclusion.

The Buddha has eloquently expressed the profound truth that the exploration of the inner world within ourselves is a prerequisite for Enlightenment. Let me reiterate that

"It is in this fathom-long body with its perceptions and thoughts that there is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world."

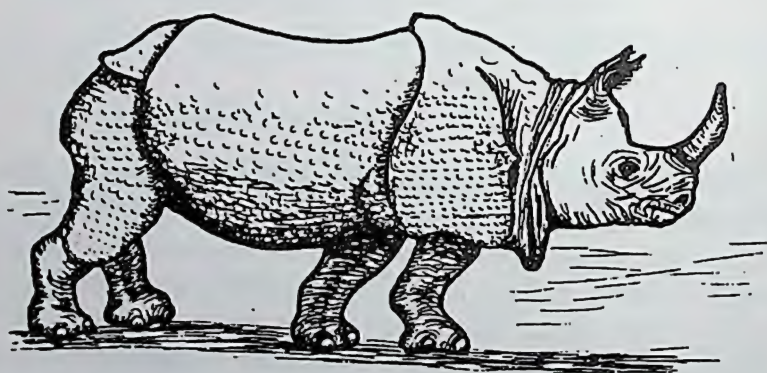
*"By walking one can never reach
The end and limit of the world,
Yet there is no release from suffering
Without reaching the world's end.
Hence the wise one who knows the world,
The one who has lived the holy life,
Will reach the end of the world,
Knowing the world's end, at peace.
He no more longs for this world
Nor for any other"*

Anguttara Nikaya iv 45

Religious recluses understandably feel the need to keep themselves away from the escapist activities and numerous attractions of the outer world with its emphasis on money, power, position, politics and pleasure. Whoever turns his back on this outer world knows that he has suddenly found more time and energy to explore fully the hitherto hidden world of his own mind. Next he lives alone. Then from the elevated vantage point on the mountaintop of total isolation, what does he see? He starts observing with greater clarity all the once-concealed valleys of his subconscious. Totally unruffled by transitory excitements, worldly interests and people, in this special environment where there is both inner and outer silence, it becomes possible to delve deeply into oneself. At last the renunciant realises that he is devoting himself to higher pursuits.

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WHO IS A GENUINE BRAHMIN ?

The Dhammapada is one of the greatest treasures in Buddhist literature. One can find the essence of the Buddha's teachings in this work, which is a famous collection of his aphoristic sayings. In a sense *The Dhammapada* is to Buddhism what *The Bhagavad Gita* is to Hinduism. Of the many fine translations of *The Dhammapada* that are in existence, I have relied heavily on that of the Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda.

"*Him do I call a Brahmana*" is the resounding refrain of the verses in the *Brahmana Vagga*, which is the final section of *The Dhammapada*. In each verse the Buddha describes the spiritual attributes that the true Brahmana possesses, which is followed by the refrain — "*Him do I call a Brahmana*". Here the word "Brahmana" does not refer to the priestly caste of the Hindus; it rather refers to those who have attained Enlightenment. We can quietly meditate on the profound utterances of the Buddha that are found in these verses. In this essay each of the verses is preceded by short statements explaining the events leading up to these remarkable utterances.

A brahmin who resided in Savatthi became a great devotee of the Buddha and his monks with the result that he invited the latter to his home for meals. With great respect he addressed them as "Arhats" when they entered his home. Then those monks who were not Arhats felt embarrassed when they were called "Arhats". Consequently, they stopped visiting his home and the brahmin felt sad and was in low spirits. He

reported the matter to the Buddha who thereupon asked the monks concerned whether or not they had experienced false pride and undue elation whenever they were mistakenly addressed as "Arhats". The monks answered in the negative. "Bhikkhus", said the Buddha, "this brahmin uses this form of address only out of respect for the Arhats and because of his boundless devotion to them. Monks must try to attain Arhatship by transcending the stream of craving."

"O Brahmana, with diligence transcend the stream of craving and give up sense desires. After understanding the destruction of conditioning, you shall know the Unconditioned" (verse 383)

Some monks visited the Buddha in order to pay homage to him. Noticing that these monks were ready for Arhatship, the Venerable Sariputta approached the master and posed a question out of concern for them: "What are the two Dhammas that you commend?"

The Buddha replied that they were tranquillity and insight.

"When the Brahmana has reached the further shore of the two states, then all the fetters of the 'one who knows' will disappear" (384)

Interestingly, Jesus said: "You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free" (John 8 : 32)

Disguising himself as a man, Mara paid the Buddha a visit. Mara is not merely the one who employs obstructive tactics to try and dissuade people from finding Enlightenment, but the personification of evil and death as well.

Mara: "Venerable Sir, what is the meaning of 'Param'? It is a word that you often use."

The Buddha: *"O wicked Mara ! That word has nothing to do with you ! It means 'the other shore' that can only be reached by Arhats as they are morally pure."*

"He has neither this shore (i.e. the sense bases) nor the other shore (i.e. the sense objects), nor both shores, and who is fearless and free from fetters — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 385)

'This shore' and 'the other shore' probably refer to the inner and outer spheres. The inner spheres (the sense bases) are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind ; the outer spheres (the sense objects) are respectively the visible object, sound, odour, taste, touch and mind-object. Evidently, Arhats experience neither 'this shore' (the sense bases) nor 'the other shore' (the sense objects). As their sense bases are characterised by detachment and are therefore free from craving and clinging, they do not become entangled in sense objects. Probably this exalted state is akin to that of Pratyahara as expounded by Patanjali (in his eightfold path) wherein one is totally withdrawn from all sense experience. There is no longer an 'ego' or 'experiencer' present, hence no ego-based sense experiences are possible. In actual fact the state of Pratyahara is devoid of all sense-based experiences. This dimension of nothingness defies description.

F.Max Muller has interpreted the two terms thus : 'the other shore' refers to Nirvana, whereas 'this shore' means the common life.

Once the following thoughts raced through the mind of a brahmin, "the Buddha addresses his disciples as 'Brahmana'. As I am a brahmin by caste I should also be addressed as 'Brahmana'." When he questioned the Buddha about the matter, the latter said: *"Merely because of his caste I do not call one a Brahmana ; only one who has become an Arhat — Him do I call a Brahmana."*

"He who is watchful, pure and living alone in the forest, dutiful and free from fetters, he who has attained Enlightenment — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 386)

Resplendent in his regal robes, King Pasenadi of Kosala visited the Buddha on a full moon day. Also present on that occasion was the Venerable Kaludayi whose mental absorption (*Jhana*) was so deep that his body radiated a deep golden hue. The Venerable Ananda noticed that the setting sun and the moon were both sending out beams of light. Such was the beautiful setting when the Venerable Ananda, seeing the Buddha, exclaimed, "Venerable Sir ! The light emanating from your body surpasses that from the king, the Venerable Kaludayi, the sun and the moon !"

"All Buddhas," observed the Buddha, "shine both day and night and so do their fivefold brightness."

What exactly is their fivefold brightness ? The Buddha eradicates immorality by the power of morality (*Śīla*), vice by the power of virtue (*Guna*), ignorance by the power of wisdom (*Panna*), demerit by the power of merit (*Punna*) and evil or unrighteousness by the power of righteousness.

"The sun shines by day ; the moon shines by night ; the king shines in his royal regalia ; the Arhat shines in his meditation ; but the Buddha in all his splendour shines all day and night" (verse 387)

A brahmanical ascetic in Savatthi realised that it was the practice of the Buddha to call his disciples Pabbajita which means monk or recluse. This term is used to describe those who give up all family and social life for the sake of becoming bhikkus. So the ascetic went to the Buddha with his question.

The Buddha answered , *"I do not call a recluse a Pabbajita. Only the person who has cleansed himself of mental impurities is a Pabbajita."*

"As he has given up evil, he is called a Brahmana ; as he moves along quietly, he is called a Samana (recluse) ; as he throws away his own impurities, he is called a Pabbajita — a recluse" (verse 388)

"None should attack a Brahmana, nor should a Brahmana vent his anger on his attacker ! Shame on him who attacks a Brahmana ! Greater shame on him who vents his anger on his attacker in return"
(verse 389)

People used to commend the Venerable Sariputta's patience and forbearance. His pupils used to say of Sariputta that he did not fly into a temper if he were beaten, but remained tranquil instead. Now a certain brahmin who held divergent views said that he would like to provoke Sariputta into losing his temper. So when Sariputta was on his alms round the brahmin hit Sariputta's back with his hand. Then Sariputta without even turning himself to catch a glimpse of the attacker, proceeded to walk as though nothing had taken place. Feeling ashamed of himself, the brahmin fell at the Arhat's feet and not only begged for forgiveness, but also invited Sariputta to visit his home for a meal. That evening when some bhikkus reported the incident to the Buddha, they also commented about the possibility of the attacker becoming bolder and thereafter proceeding to assault other bhikkus. The Buddha replied , *"No true brahmin beats another true brahmin. Only an ordinary brahmin or an ordinary man would beat an Arhat out of anger and malice."*

"Restraining oneself from life's pleasures is very advantageous to a Brahmana ; the more the intention to harm ends, the more all suffering disappears" (verse 390)

When certain nuns did not want to perform the Vinaya (Code of Monastic Discipline) ceremonies with the Venerable Maha Pajapati Gotami as they were questioning her genuineness, the Buddha remarked that no doubts should be raised about her in this regard as she was restrained in thought, word and deed.

Seven days after the birth of Prince Siddhartha (the future Buddha) his mother Queen Maya passed away. Thereupon

Maha Pajapati Gotami became the chief queen of his father King Suddhodana. It was Pajapati who brought up the infant prince. She was, in other words, the stepmother of the Buddha who looked after him with a lot of tender loving care. She even allowed her own son Nanda to be raised by a nurse so that she could be a mother to Prince Siddhartha.

Years later Pajapati's request that women should be allowed to enter the Order as bhikkunis was turned down by the Buddha. On a subsequent occasion she made the same request. Accompanied by 500 ladies with shaven heads who were also dressed in dyed robes, Pajapati went to the Mahavana forest near Vesali where the Buddha was sojourning. The Venerable Ananda championed her cause. The Buddha agreed to her request, provided she accepted the eight special conditions that he stipulated and acted accordingly. When she consented to observe them, Pajapati was admitted to the Order. She became the first bhikkuni.

When some bhikkunis ceased performing Vinaya ceremonies on the grounds that Pajapati did not have a preceptor, the Buddha defended her by saying that he himself had given her the eight garu dhammas which she learned and practised. *"I am her preceptor,"* he declared, *"have no doubts whatsoever about Arhats."*

"He who desists from evil in thought, word and deed, and who has restraint in these three — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 391)

Upatissa (later known as Sariputta) and Kolita (later known as Moggallana) are much revered in the Buddhist world because they were the foremost disciples of the Buddha. The two brahmin boys Upatissa and Kolita had been spiritual seekers from an early age. Such was their bond of affection that they helped each other. When they were not satisfied with Sanjaya, they sought another teacher who could point the way to the Deathless. When Upatissa and Kolita parted company there was an understanding that whoever discovers the true teachings should inform the other about it.

One day Upatissa saw the Venerable Assaji who was on his alms round. Assaji's noble appearance made a strong impression on Upatissa with the result that he deferentially went to the monk and asked questions, "Who is your teacher? What does he teach?" Assaji informed him that the Buddha was staying at the Veluvana monastery in Rajagaha. Next he quoted a verse: "The Enlightened One has explained the origin of all phenomena and also their cessation. This is his teaching." No sooner had half the verse been recited than Upatissa understood the teaching.

Upatissa kept his word and informed his friend Kolita that he had found the true teaching. The two friends along with many followers went to the Buddha and requested permission to join the Order. This request was granted and before long both Sariputta and Moggallana attained Arhatship.

Never forgetting that it was because of Assaji that he had not only met the Buddha but also attained Arhatship, Sariputta always paid respects in the direction of his teacher Assaji. It was a gesture of reverence for, and gratitude to, his teacher. So Sariputta slept with his head in the direction of his teacher. Some monks residing at the monastery complained to the Buddha, "Venerable Sir! Sariputta still worships the directions which used to be his practice as a brahmin boy! Apparently he has not yet dropped his former beliefs!" Sariputta explained that it was only a mark of honour to Assaji.

Then the Buddha said, *"This is not an act of worshipping the various directions, for Sariputta is simply respecting his teacher who guided him to the Buddha. Paying homage to such a teacher is the rightful thing to do."*

"If from any person one should understand the Dharma, the former should be held in reverence in the same manner that a brahmin holds in reverence the sacrificial fire" (verse 392)

A certain brahmanical ascetic thought that he should be called 'Brahmana' in view of the Buddha's practice of addressing his disciples as 'Brahmana'. He visited the Buddha

and expressed the above-mentioned opinion. The Buddha said, "*O brahmin, neither because of his matted hair nor his birth (as a brahmin) do I call one a Brahmana. Only the one who fully understands the Four Noble Truths — Him do I call a Brahmana.*"

"Neither by matted hair nor by familial lineage nor by birth is one a Brahmana. But the one who realises the Truth, and is righteous and pure — He is a Brahmana" (verse 393)

Suspending himself upside down from the branch of a tree near the city-gate of Vesali, a brahmin repeatedly said, "I want one hundred cattle, I want money, I want a woman slave. These you must give me, O people ! If I fall from this tree and die this city will be in ruins." The frightened folk pleaded with the brahmin to climb down the tree. This incident was reported by the monks to the Buddha who remarked that only the ignorant, not the wise, would fall for that trick.

"Of what use is your matted hair? O fool ! Of what use is your dressing in antelope skin? Outside you beautify yourself but inside you are full of craving" (verse 394)

Interestingly, several centuries after the passing away of the Buddha, Jesus made an observation that is reported in the Bible. Jesus accepted a Pharisee's invitation to eat with him. After they had sat at the table the Pharisee was surprised that Jesus had failed to wash himself before the meal. Then Jesus said, "*You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people !*" (Luke 11 : 39-40)

When Sakka, the king of celestial beings, and his entourage visited the Buddha and started paying homage to him, it so happened that Kisa Gotami suddenly appeared there by means of levitation. Noticing Sakka's presence there, she retreated. Then Sakka wanted to know who she was. "O Sakka," answered the Buddha, "*that is my daughter Kisa Gotami. Once she was distraught with grief because of her son's demise and I impressed on*

her the truth that all compounded things are subject to change and impermanence. Consequently, she understood the Dharma, joined the Order and became an Arhat. Kisa Gotami is an eminent female disciple of mine."

Because of her thinness she was appropriately called Kisa ('Kisa' in Pali means lean, haggard and emaciated). Such was her austerity that she wore rough robes.

"The person wearing robes made of discarded rags, who is thin with veins standing out, and who in the forest meditates in solitude — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 395)

A brahmin from Savatthi held the view that because the Buddha called his disciples 'Brahmana' he should also be similarly addressed ; besides, his parents were brahmins. When he went to the Buddha and raised the question, the Buddha explained that he would not call someone a 'Brahmana' merely because he was born of brahmin parents. Only the person who has discarded defilements and ceased clinging deserves to be called a 'Brahmana'.

"I do not call him a Brahmana merely because he was born of a Brahmanical womb, or sprang from a Brahmanical mother. He is indeed proud and wealthy. But he who has nothing and is without any attachments — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 396)

Uggasena married a dancer who belonged to a group of entertainers. With the help of his father-in-law, Uggasena trained as an acrobat. The man then excelled in his chosen field. Once when he was performing acrobatic feats the Buddha appeared. While he was still perched on top of a long bamboo pole he heard the Buddha preaching and attained Arhatship. Later Uggasena climbed down and asked that he be accepted as a disciple. He was admitted into the Order.

In answer to a question from some monks, Uggasena said that he experienced no fear when he was perched on that

bamboo pole. The bhikkus asked the Buddha; "Is there any truth in Uggasena's claim that he is an Arhat?"

The Buddha declared, "*One who has severed all fetters, as Uggasena has done, becomes fearless. He is an Arhat indeed.*"

"He who has freed himself from all fetters is fearless, who has transcended attachment and is devoid of moral impurities — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 397)

There was a dispute between two brahmins who lived in Savatthi. Each of them owned an ox. Each boasted that his ox was superior to that of the other. Each brahmin was saying that of the two oxen his own ox was better and stronger than that of the other. Because of their intention to settle this argument they felt the need to put the strength of their animals to the test. So near a river bank each ox in turn had to pull a cart heavy with sand. Each ox pulled and pulled in turn but the cart remained stationary. After a time the ropes broke.

When the monks reported this rather amusing incident to the Buddha, he remarked, "*Bhikkus, the straps that are visible to the eyes are easy to break, but one should break the inner straps within you such as anger and craving.*"

"He who has broken off the strap of hatred, the thong of craving, the rope of heresies along with the appendage of latent tendencies, who has cast aside the cross bar of ignorance, who is Enlightened — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 398)

The wife of a brahmin blurted out "*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa*" (Homage to the Exalted One, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One). In this way she gave utterance to her homage in the presence of some of her husband's friends whom he had invited for a meal. Hearing these words angered the husband with the result that he visited the Buddha and posed challenging questions, such as the following : To live peacefully and happily what must we kill ?

The Buddha said, *O brahmin, one must kill anger (dosa) to live peacefully and happily. The destruction of anger is much approved by the Buddha and the Arhats.* Impressed by the Buddha's reply, he entered the Order and later attained Arhatship.

Enraged by the news that his eldest brother had joined the Order, the younger brother went to the Buddha in the monastery and started using abusive language.

The Buddha said, *"O brahmin, if you offer food to some guests and they leave the house without taking it, to whom would that food belong?"*

The brahmin answered that the food would then belong to him (i.e. the host). *"In the same way,"* said the Buddha, *"as I don't accept your abuse, the abuse must belong to you."*

Suddenly, feeling great respect for the Buddha, he also entered the Order and became an Arhat later.

Thereafter his two younger brothers also came there with the intention of severely scolding the Buddha, but they also entered the Order and eventually became Arhats.

The bhikkus remarked, *"How great and wonderful are the Buddha's virtues ! These four brahmin brothers hurled abuse at our Teacher, but he helped them to realise the Truth !"*

Then the Buddha replied, *"My sons, as I have patience and forbearance, and as I never wrong those who wrong me, I am a refuge to many."*

"He who, though innocent of any wrongdoing, bears abuse, beating and imprisonment, whose powerful army is patience — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 399)

On one occasion the Venerable Sariputta along with some monks were standing outside the door of his mother's house at Nalaka village for the purpose of receiving alms. Although the lady invited the group into her house, she scolded her son Sariputta while offering him food. *"O you eater of leftovers ! You have given up riches to become a monk ! You have*

destroyed us !" Then while offering food to the other monks she rudely remarked, "You are using my son as your attendant ! Now eat your food." She poured scorn on her son. Sariputta was reviled by his mother but he listened to her in dignified silence. When the monks gave an account of how Sariputta had patiently borne his mother's abuse, the Buddha stated that Arhats never get irritated.

"He who is purified of anger, dutiful, virtuous, free from craving, restrained and who in his last body lives — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 400)

Some monks were having a discussion about the Arhat Bhikkuni Uppala Vanna who was the rape victim of a former suitor of hers. They went to the Buddha who was questioned whether or not Arhats enjoy sensual pleasures in the manner of ordinary human beings.

"Arhats do not enjoy sensual pleasures," said the Buddha, "as they do not cling to sense objects and to sensual pleasures. They are like water that never clings to a lotus leaf."

"As water on a lotus leaf, as a mustard seed on a needle's point, in the same manner is he who remains unattached to sensual pleasures — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 401)

The slave of a Brahmin ran away from his master's home and joined the Order and after a time attained Arhatship. Once when he was begging for alms with the Buddha, his former master noticed him and proceeded to catch hold of his robe. The Buddha personally intervened in the situation and declared, *"This monk has put down his life's burden."*

When the master asked whether his ex-slave had become an Arhat, the Buddha confirmed that that was indeed the case.

"He who even in this very life knows the end of suffering, who has cast aside the burden and is free — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 402)

The sentence "who has cast aside the burden" is open to interpretation. It probably means the dropping of the illusion that there is such a thing as a permanent and unchanging self, personality, ego or 'I'.

We cherish the illusion that we are distinct and separate individuals when in fact we are nothing more than constantly changing combinations of the Five Aggregates (i.e. the five psycho-physical parts) : namely,

Form, figure, image (*Rupa*)

Feeling, sensation, pain (*Vedana*)

Perception (*Sanna*)

Mental formations (*Sankhara*)

The stream of consciousness (*Vinnana*)

A house, if it were capable of thought, might think "I am the best house in the land", "I am magnificent and comfortable" and "I am indestructible", quite unaware that it is merely a temporary structure made up of bricks, concrete, metal and a host of other things. It is simply the aggregate of many things. An earthquake can unrecognisably reduce the house to rubble in a matter of seconds. Similarly, a terrorist bomb can blow the house to smithereens. Where then is the house ? Does it still exist ? It is, however, more important to ask the question : Did the "house" *ever* exist ? It only *seemed* to exist because anything that can be taken to pieces has no *inherent reality*. Any "house" has only the external *appearance* of a dwelling, as it is just a mixture of different things temporarily put together, but actually the house is *not real* for two reasons. First, the "house" is not a *thing per se* ; second, *it cannot exist forever*.

What is true of a house is equally true of our psycho-physical organisms. Both our minds and bodies are nothing but bundles of agglomerations in a state of perpetual flux. At Buddhist funerals monks chant several verses but the following are noteworthy on account of their timeless profundity :

Sabbe sankhara anicca ti

Yada pannaya passati

Atha nibbindati dukkhe

Esa maggo visuddhiya.

ALL CONDITIONED THINGS ARE IMPERMANENT —

When with wisdom one realises this

One shuns suffering :

This is the path of purity.

Sabbe sankhara dukkha ti

Yada pannaya passati

Atha nibbindati dukkhe

Esa maggo visuddhiya

ALL CONDITIONED THINGS CAUSE SUFFERING —

When with wisdom one realises this

One shuns suffering :

This is the path of purity.

Sabbe dhamma anatta ti

Yada pannaya passati

Atha nibbindati dukkhe

Esa maggo visuddhiya

ALL STATES ARE DEVOID OF A SELF —

When with wisdom one realises this

One shuns suffering :

This is the path of purity.

We are nothing but psycho-physical combinations that are in a constant state of change. We are like drops of water in the vast ocean that coalesce from time to time and become "waves", which dash against the shore, then become drops of water again, which in turn sooner or later join themselves together to form other "waves". As a wave has no abiding existence, and is therefore unreal or illusory, the self is unreal and illusory. The "self" is only a fleeting impression. *Understanding this great*

truth automatically opens the door to virtue, for is it not a fact that the deceptive self has hitherto made us very conceited, extremely selfish and self-assertively aggressive ? It is only the light of intelligence, the light of insight or the light of clarity that dissolves the self once and for all. That dissolution, when it happens, is naturally the ending of all selfishness and the beginning of selflessness or virtue.

King Bimbisara of Magadha is often remembered as one of the great patrons of the Buddha who presented him with the Bamboo Grove. Gold-skinned Queen Khema, Bimbisara's chief consort, was both very beautiful and extremely proud. Little did she realise that priding herself on her good looks was an ugly side to her character. Although Bimbisara tried hard to persuade Khema to visit the Buddha and pay homage to him, she avoided him as she had heard that the Buddha always decried beauty, regarding it as something transient and worthless.

Bimbisara used a clever plan to achieve his goal. His court musicians were under orders to sing the praises of the Buddha's monastery, so when she learned about its pleasant and relaxed atmosphere she changed her mind and decided to visit the Teacher.

It was quite a coincidence that as Khema turned up at the monastery the Buddha was discoursing on the Dharma in the audience hall. Supernaturally, the Buddha made Khema experience a vision in which he was being fanned by a very pretty young lady seated next to him. Exquisite was her entire body and face. Khema then realised that her own beauty was obviously inferior to that of this young lady. Next, as Khema gazed at the lovely young lady, the latter's beauty started fading away ! Probably her charms were drifting away like the morning mist in the first rays of the sun. The former beauty then became very old and unattractive. Finally, her ageing and decaying body changed into a worm-eaten stinking corpse ! Immediately after having this vision, Khema understood the ephemeral nature of beauty.

Taking notice of Khema's inner state, the Buddha instructed her as follows :

"Khema ! Observe this deteriorating body which is held together by a bag of bones. It is subject to illness and putrefaction. Meditate on the body which is highly valued by the foolish. Meditate on the uselessness of youthful beauty."

After pondering over the Buddha's advice, Khema attained Arhatship. Later she joined the Order and became his principal female disciple.

One night Sakka , the king of the devas, along with his retinue were in the process of paying their respects to the Enlightened One. Bhikkuni Khema also arrived on the scene for the same purpose. They had all travelled through the skies, using their supernatural powers. Khema paid her respects and left soon as Sakka was there.

"Who is that bhikkuni ," Sakka inquired.

"She is not only one of my prominent female disciples," replied the Buddha, *"but also one whose wisdom remains unsurpassed among bhikkunis."*

"He whose insight is profound, who is wise, who knows the right path and the wrong, who has attained the greatest End — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 403)

It being the rainy season, Bhikku Tissa went into retreat for a period of three months. He selected a mountain cave for the purpose of meditation. Every morning it was his practice to go to the nearby village where an elderly lady devotee regularly provided him with alms.

There happened to be a female guardian spirit who also lived in that cave, and she felt uneasy about having to share the cave with a monk of such high moral standards. As she could not bring herself to ask the monk to leave the cave, she thought out a clever device to achieve her sinister aim. She wanted to accuse the monk of wrongdoing and thereby subtly pressurise him to go away.

The spirit not only possessed the youngest son of the lady who regularly gave Tissa alms, but also made the spirit-possessed boy turn his head backwards and roll his eyes. Alarmed by her son's behaviour, the poor woman started screaming. Thereupon the spirit said, "At present I possess your son but I will set him free only if your monk washes his feet with water and sprinkles it over your son's head." The following day when the monk went to her for alms, the spirit's instructions were carried out and the boy remained quiet and undisturbed.

When Tissa returned to the cave he found the spirit waiting for him at the cave's entrance.

"I'm the spirit who guards this cave," she said, asserting her right to the cave, "O you exorcist, you must not enter it."

Tissa explained that he had always been a virtuous monk and also that he had never violated the vow that binds him to abstain from practising exorcism or witchcraft. She alleged that Tissa had treated the spirit-possessed boy which amounted to practising exorcism. While standing before the cave the monk knew deep within himself that he was absolutely innocent of any wrongdoing. That very realisation filled him with happiness and he attained Arhatship. Tissa continued staying in the cave until the end of the rainy season and returned to the Jetavana monastery.

So far as self-centred cunning is concerned, we can see that some spirits are basically the same as some human beings.

When Tissa related his strange experience, the other monks asked whether he had been angry with the spirit. It was a searching question. Perhaps they were trying to gauge whether or not he was fully liberated. So when Tissa stated that he had not been angry, the rather sceptical monks went to the Buddha and raised the subject.

The Buddha said, "*Tissa is truthful. He is indeed an Arhat. Neither has he attachments nor anger.*"

"*He who is careful to keep his distance from both householders and mendicants, who wanders without a home, who is desireless — Him do I call a Brahmana*" (verse 404)

Having devoted his time and energy to meditation in a forest, and thereby having attained Enlightenment, an Arhat was going back to the Buddha to express his heartfelt gratitude to his Teacher.

As the monk was moving across a village a woman, who had had a quarrel with her husband, started following the monk. We do not know why she was walking behind the bhikku. Was she doing that from simple spite, or was she captivated by the magnetism of the Arhat's aura ? When her husband noticed her behaviour, the man jumped to the conclusion that the monk was stealing his wife. Obviously he misread the situation. When the husband yelled at the monk and threatened to give him a beating, the wife earnestly begged her husband not to hit the monk. Her words were counter-productive. When she pleaded with her husband to avoid harming the monk, that only increased his anger. He severely beat the monk, who continued on his way to the Jetavana monastery where the Buddha was in residence.

Noticing the injuries that the monk had sustained, which were all over his body, the other bhikkus looked after him. When the injured monk was asked by the other monks if he harboured anger against his attacker, he replied in the negative. Yet these monks reported the violence to the Buddha, asking him whether or not the monk had reacted with anger.

The Buddha declared, *"Arhats are those who have thrown away the stick and the sword. Even when they are beaten, Arhats do not become angry."*

"He who has eschewed violence against all beings, whether they be weak or strong, who neither kills nor causes slaughter — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 405)

In the Buddhist world the offering of alms, especially to monks and nuns, has long been regarded as a very meritorious deed. It is the virtue of Dana — liberality, generosity or giving.

On one occasion the wife of a brahmin requested her husband to fetch four monks from the Jetavana monastery as

she was desirous of offering them alms. She specified that only four senior monks who were true brahmins should be invited. However he returned home with four novices (Samaneras) who happened to be Arhats. Great was her disappointment when she noticed that the invited monks were youngish novices. Enraged by what he had done, she asked her husband to return to the monastery and bring along only senior monks. She was so annoyed that during his absence from home, the novices were given neither the higher seats nor food.

The Venerable Sariputta whom the husband met at the monastery was next invited. Sariputta came to the house. Noticing the presence of the novices there, Sariputta asked if they had had their meals. After hearing from them that they had not been given food, and also that the available food was sufficient only for four, Sariputta returned to the monastery. Next, the brahmin went back to the monastery and invited the Venerable Moggallana. The invitation was accepted but he too returned to the monastery when he understood what had happened.

The poor novices were desperately hungry. The situation moved Sakka, the king of the devas, with the result that he visited the house in the guise of an old brahmin. Then the couple (the brahmin and his wife) treated the old brahmin deferentially and proceeded to offer him a seat of honour, but lo and behold Sakka simply sat on the floor and paid his respects to the novices ! Then Sakka revealed his identity. Realising that Sakka himself was paying his respects to the novices, the couple offered food to the novices and Sakka.

When he was given an account of the sequence of events, the Buddha said, "*Arhats harbour no ill-will against those who are hostile towards them.*"

"*He who remains friendly among the unfriendly, non-violent among the violent, free from attachments among those with attachments — Him do I call a Brahmana*" (verse 406)

When Cula Panthaka joined the Order, his elder brother Venerable Maha Panthaka was already an Arhat.

The following is an instance of how the law of karma operates. Cula Panthaka was born stupid and unimaginative because in one of his previous lives he had poked fun at a very dull monk. Consequently Cula Panthaka failed to memorise even a single verse during a period of four months. Thereafter his brother, who was an Arhat, advised Cula Panthaka to leave the monastery. Unfortunately the monks got the wrong impression that the Arhat's decision to give such advice had been motivated by anger. So they asked the Buddha the following question : Do Arhats still lose their temper ? Do they still have defilements such as ill-will ?

The Buddha thereupon made the matter very clear : *"Maha Panthaka did not act out of ill-will as he was only trying to help his brother. Arhats are devoid of defilements of the mind such as ill-will."*

"He in whom lust, hate, pride and hypocrisy have all fallen down, like a mustard seed that falls from a needle's point — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 407)

The Venerable Pilinda Vaccha was given to speaking with people in an offensive manner, frequently using terms of abuse such as "You wretch, come here" or "You wretch, go there". At that time such epithets were used when addressing outcasts. Some monks complained to the Buddha about his conduct. The Buddha asked for Vaccha and spoke to the monk about it.

The Buddha discovered that in many previous lives Vaccha had been born only in brahmanical families. The explanation for Vaccha's condescending manner is the brahmanical sense of superiority.

The Buddha said, *"Monks, do not take offence. Vaccha addresses others as "wretch" only from force of habit that can be traced back to many past existences as a brahmin. He bears no malice. He means no harm. Arhats do not harm others."*

"He who speaks gently, instructively and truthfully, avoiding offensive language — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 408)

A brahmin from Savatthi had kept his upper garment on the ground with the intention of giving it an airing. An Arhat who was returning to the Jetavana monastery noticed the garment. Believing that it was just a discarded piece of cloth, the monk picked it up. Then the brahmin abused the monk and also accused him of stealing it. "You shaven head, you are a thief !" The monk immediately returned it to the irate brahmin.

The other monks at the monastery poked fun at this monk by asking him whether the cloth was long, short, coarse or fine. "Whether it is long or short, coarse or fine," explained the monk, "is immaterial as I have no attachment to it whatsoever." Then the other monks requested the Buddha to clear their minds of doubts regarding the monk's statement that he has ceased being attached to anything.

The Buddha declared, *"That monk is telling the truth. Arhats do not take things that are not given to them. Besides, they are not attached to material things."*

"He who takes nothing in this world that is not given to him, be it long or short, large or small, good or bad — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 409)

The Venerable Sariputta and his entourage of many monks went to a monastery for staying during the rainy season. However, the lay disciples failed to provide all the monks' needs although at first they had promised to do so. Only some of their requisites had been given. Then Sariputta said: "If robes are offered, send them to me. Even if nothing is offered, keep me informed about it." But the monks, who were probably oblivious to the fact that Sariputta was an Arhat, complained to the Buddha that Sariputta was still attached to mundane things such as robes.

The Buddha remarked, *"Sariputta has ceased craving. When he wanted you to bring back the robes to him, Sariputta's intentions were twofold : to prevent a loss of merit to the lay disciples, and to ensure some benefit to the monks and novices."*

"He who desires nothing relating to this world or to the beyond, who is free from craving and moral impurities — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 410)

In an incident that bears a striking similarity to the preceding one which inspired verse 410, some sceptical monks had complained that the Venerable Moggallana still had worldly attachments. But the Buddha assured them that Moggallana was free from craving.

"He who has made himself free from craving, who because he has Understood does not doubtfully ask How ? Why ? and who has attained Nirvanic Deathlessness — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 411)

It seemed like a complaint when a group of monks informed the Buddha that the laity were making many offerings to the novice Revata who had also found fame and fortune. A forest dweller dedicated to solitary living, Revata by means of his supernatural power had built many monasteries for monks.

In vindication of Revata the Buddha said, *"Monks, Revata has rid himself of craving. He has attained Arhatship."*

"He who in this world has gone beyond both the ties of good and evil, who is joyous, immaculate and pure — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 412)

In a former life the Venerable Candabha had made sandalwood offerings to a stupa enshrining Kassapa Buddha's relics. As a result of this meritorious deed he was reborn with a distinguishing feature in a brahmanical family living in Savatthi. His special feature was a circle of light radiating from his navel ; hence the name Candabha (Canda=moon). Some brahmins proudly exhibited him in the city. Only those who paid were permitted to touch him. Once he was on display near the Jetavana monastery where the Buddha was in residence. Devotees on their way to the monastery were told, "Why go to

the Buddha and listen to his teachings ? There is none more powerful than Candabha. Anyone touching him will become wealthy. Why don't you come in and see for yourself ?" But the devotees retorted, "Only the Buddha is powerful and he is beyond compare."

With the intention of fostering rivalry between Candabha and the Buddha, the brahmins led Candabha into the monastery. Surprisingly, when Candabha was in the Buddha's presence the circle of light suddenly disappeared. The light stopped shining by itself. But when Candabha was not in the Buddha's presence the light reappeared automatically. The mysterious light would disappear when he was taken back to the Buddha. Candabha thought, "I am sure the Buddha has the skill to make this light disappear." So when he requested the Buddha to teach him the skill, the Buddha asked Candabha to become a monk first before he would impart the skill.

As a monk Candabha started meditating on the 32 impurities of the body and before long he attained the exalted state of Arhatship. When the brahmins visited him and asked if he had learned the skill, Candabha said, "Please leave this place. I'm going to stay here."

After hearing about this conversation from the monks, the Buddha remarked, "*What Candabha says is true. He has in fact completely removed all the impurities of his mind.*"

"He who is spotless like the moon, who is pure, serene and unagitated, who has destroyed the desire for delightful states — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 413)

During her pregnancy which was exceptionally long, Princess Suppavasa used to contemplate the uniqueness of the Triple Gem — the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. She requested her husband to meet the Buddha and pay homage to the great Teacher on her behalf, and so when he was told about her, the Buddha remarked, "*May Suppavasa be out of danger and free from fear; may she have a healthy and noble son.*"

Strangely enough, as the verse was being recited she did in fact give birth to a healthy son called Sivali. In celebration of the happy event the Buddha and some monks were invited to their home where they were presented with alms.

On the suggestion of the Venerable Sariputta, the lad agreed to become a monk at the tender age of seven. In preparation for ordination his head had to be fully shaved. Immediately after the boy's head was shaved he became an Arhat.

In a previous life Sivali had practised to the fullest possible extent one of the 10 Paramitas (Perfections) which are regarded as the 10 prerequisites for Buddhahood. He had perfected Dana Parami (the Perfection of Giving or Liberality) with the result that he became "the Prince of Receivers", or the greatest recipient of offerings.

Once the monks posed the question : Why was Sivali confined to his mother's womb for a very long period ? A tradition has grown that his birth was delayed for 7 years instead of 9 months. The Buddha explained the reason why Sivali and his mother had to suffer much during the confinement and childbirth. In one of his past lives Sivali had been a prince. In the process of having to recapture his former kingdom that was now in the hands of another ruler, Sivali had, acting on his mother's advice, besieged a city with the result that people were deprived of water and food for some days. Therefore the sufferings of the mother and child were the karmic repercussions from that evil deed of theirs in a bygone existence.

"He who has passed over this swampy road of rebirths, which is difficult to pass, and its vanity, who has gone through and has reached the other shore of Nirvana, who is meditative, steadfast, free from doubts and attachments, and remains content — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 411)

The ascetic and austere way of life of renunciants is not without trials and tribulations. If Buddhist monks or nuns break the vows that they voluntarily make, then they are answerable

only to themselves. They are not called to account for their misconduct by a Divine source. Whereas breaking rules are regressive steps, adherence to them are progressive steps that pave the way for moral excellence. Sooner or later every monk or nun has to decide whether or not to yield to temptation. Their seriousness and sincerity are often put to the test in the course of their wanderings.

Sundara Samudda, the son of a wealthy family from Savatthi, entered the Order and started leading the contemplative life of a monk in Rajagaha. However, his parents were weeping because they were missing him a great deal. Noticing their anguish, a courtesan approached them and said, "If I succeed in persuading your son to give up the Order and return to the life of a layman, how would you reward me for my services?" Then the parents assured the courtesan that they would make her rich. She demanded a large sum of money and proceeded to Rajagaha.

The cunning courtesan rented a house in Rajagaha on the route frequented by Sundara on his rounds to collect alms. She began the practice of preparing delicious food and offering it at her doorstep to Sundara. Thus she gave alms. The monk got accustomed to receiving food from her regularly. Later she would invite him to come inside the house. Next she paid money to several children who in return were required to play outside her house. She knew that children would make a noise when playing there.

Once she told the monk that as it was noisy and dusty on the ground floor, it would be better if he entered into the quietness of the top floor for his meal. No sooner had he walked into the upstairs room than she closed its door. The she began seducing the monk. She declared her love, "Venerable Sir, please be my husband and I will be your wife. Following our happily married life together, we can eventually enter the Order and try our best to attain Nirvana." It then occurred to Sundara that he had made a mistake. Immediately the Buddha knew about Sundara's situation.

"Ananda!" said the Buddha, *"there is a struggle going on now between Sundara and a courtesan in Rajagaha. In this contest the monk is going to win."*

The Buddha sent forth his supernatural radiance and tried hard to dissuade Sundara from wrongdoing : *"My son ! Give up the craving for riches and sensual pleasures and get rid of lust !"*

Sundara meditated on this message from his Master and attained Arhatship.

"He who in this world discards sense-desires, renounces worldly life and becomes a homeless mendicant in whom all desire for existence is extinguished — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 415)

In a former life Jatila had done a meritorious deed in his capacity as a goldsmith. As an outward expression of his devotion and piety, Jatila made several golden flowers which he kept in three golden pots. These he next offered to the stupa of Kassapa Buddha (the predecessor of Gautama the Buddha).

It was probably a pleasant surprise when in his last life Jatila discovered a large quantity of gold in the backyard of his newly constructed house. He came by this wealth soon after his marriage that resulted in the birth of three sons. Theists would like to believe that his good fortune originated in Divine grace, regarding it purely as the gift of an imagined Being. On the contrary, this happening illustrates the principle of "as a man sows, so he shall reap". In his last life Jatila was only reaping what he had already sown in a former life. It was not that he had been "rewarded" by a mind-created "Creator". Those who understand the hidden workings of the karmic law can also see very clearly the connection between the three golden pots offered to the stupa (the cause) and having three sons (the effect).

In his final life Jatila joined the Order and in due course became an Arhat.

When the monks asked Jatila whether he was still attached to his gold and his sons, Jatila answered in the negative. Jatila's response was reported to the Buddha who confirmed that Jatila was free from craving and pride. He had indeed attained Arhatship.

"He who in this world discards craving, renounces worldly life and becomes a homeless mendicant, who has cleansed away all craving for becoming — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 416)

Many were the persons who found Enlightenment after listening to the Buddha's discourses. The dancer Nata Puttaka was one such person who benefited immensely from a talk given by the Buddha. After hearing one discourse the man entered the Order and attained Arhatship.

Once the Buddha and the monks were begging for food. Among his entourage was Nata Puttaka, the former dancer. Oddly enough, on the road they ran into another dancer, for suddenly they were aware of the presence of a young man who was dancing. It seemed like a situation in which Nata Puttaka was being put to the test. Probably because there had been some question as to whether or not Nata Puttaka was a fully-fledged Arhat, some monks asked him if he still liked to dance. When he answered 'no', the Buddha was informed about it.

Then the Buddha said, *"Monks, he has transcended attachment and he is now an Arhat."*

"He who breaks free from human and heavenly chains, and has totally severed all ties — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 417)

With reference to the dancer Nata Puttaka who had attained Arhatship, the Buddha said, *"Monks, Nata Puttaka no longer takes delight in anything."*

"He who has given up what gives pleasure and what gives pain, who is serene and free from the seeds of future existence, the hero who has overcome all the worlds — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 418)

"He who fully understands both the passing away of beings and their rebirth, who is without attachments, happy and Awakened — Him do I call a Brahmana (verse 419)

A brahmin called Vangisa from Rajagaha had an extraordinary power. Just by tapping the skull of a corpse he could tell if the dead person had been reborn as a god or a human being. He could also tell whether or not the deceased was in a miserable state of existence. The brahmins cashed in on his power by taking Vangisa to various places. People paid large amounts of money to discover the whereabouts of their deceased relations.

Once Vangisa and the brahmins were in the neighbourhood of the Jetavana monastery where the Buddha was staying. Noticing the crowds that were flocking to the monastery to see the Buddha, the brahmins started persuading people to visit Vangisa instead, and thereby make good use of his services. Then the people exclaimed, "Does Vangisa know anything ? Our Buddha is unsurpassed and he alone is the Enlightened One." The brahmins were in dispute with the people. They argued a lot. Eventually they all decided to go to the monastery to find out if Vangisa or the Buddha knows more. Apparently it was an attempt to ascertain whether or not Vangisa was superior to the Buddha.

The Buddha had knowledge of what was going to happen. Acting presciently, being fully aware of the intentions of the brahmins who were visiting him, the Buddha asked a monk to bring the skull of a person reborn in *hell*, the skull of a person reborn in the *animal world*, the skull of a person reborn in the *human world*, the skull of a person reborn in the *celestial world* and also the skull of an *Arhat*. These five skulls were placed in line and Vangisa was required to tell where exactly these dead persons were reborn. It was probably the most difficult challenge in his entire career.

Regarding the first four skulls, Vangisa was able to tell correctly where the deceased persons had been reborn. However, Vangisa was confused and did not know what to say about the Arhat's skull. Little did Vangisa know that Arhats never have to undergo rebirth ; more accurately expressed, Arhats cannot be reborn as they have exhausted their karma. The Arhats have extricated themselves from the cycle of births, deaths and rebirths. They are no longer enmeshed in samsara.

The Buddha said, "*Vangisa, you don't know, but I know where the owner of that skull is.*" When Vangisa pressed the Buddha to teach him how to tell where that person was reborn, the Buddha asked him first of all to enter the Order.

Vangisa became a bhikku and the Buddha advised him to meditate on the 32 parts of the body. He did likewise and before long Vangisa became an Arhat. Probably the phrase 'the 32 parts of the body' refers to the special meditation on the 32 impurities of the body (*please see the chapter entitled Ambapali : A Lady of Pleasure*).

When the brahmins asked Vangisa whether he had learned the skill of telling where the Arhat was reborn, he replied that there was really no need to learn it any more.

In answer to a question posed by the monks, the Buddha said about Vangisa, "*He understands the death and rebirth of beings. He has attained Arhatship.*"

"He whose path is unknown to gods, gandhabbas (a class of celestial beings) and men, whose passions have ceased, and who is an Arhat — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 420)

In the above-mentioned verse, according to F.L. Woodward's interpretation, 'path' or destiny refers to the next rebirth, if any.

There are four stages of sainthood — *Sotapanna*, *Sakadagami*, *Anagami* and finally *Arhat* :

SOTAPANNA

Sotapanna is the term used to describe a stream-winner or stream-enterer. What does 'stream' mean? It is the liberating stream that unfailingly leads to the ocean of Nirvana. A person of the highest morality, he has profound faith in the Triple Gem — the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. His mind is crystal clear because he is no longer under the insane illusion that a permanent soul or an unchanging entity exists. He is not foolish enough to believe that there is such a thing called 'I' or 'self' which is nothing more than a mental creation. There

are no doubts and uncertainties in his mind. He has also freed himself from all attachment to rites and ceremonies. For the purpose of overcoming the remaining obstacles in his path he will be reborn seven times at the most. Since it is only a matter of time before he attains Nirvana, he will not be reborn in states of suffering.

SAKADAGAMI

Sakadagami is a once-returner. Unless he has already achieved Arhatship, he is reborn as a human being only once. He weakens or reduces the force of sense-desires (*Kamaraga*) and ill-will (*Patigha*). *Patigha* means resentment, repugnance or anger, and is a synonym of *Vyapada* (ill-will) and *Dosa* (hate).

ANAGAMI

An Anagami is a never-returner because he has fully overcome the aforementioned two obstacles — sense desires and ill-will. Neither is he reborn in this world nor in a celestial one since he has eradicated every trace of sensuality. After his life has ended he is reborn in the Pure Abodes (*Suddhavasa*) where he attains Arhatship and is never again reborn. The Anagami saint has to destroy the last five fetters — attachment to the realms of form (*Ruparaga*), attachment to formless realms (*Aruparaga*), pride (*Mana*), restlessness (*Uddhacca*) and ignorance (*Avijja*), and he thereby attains Arhatship.

ARHAT

As he has ceased creating karma an Arhat never gets reborn. In the Introduction to his translation of the *Anguttara Nikaya*, Bhikku Bodhi has given an excellent description of the important attributes of an Arhat : "The arahant has abandoned lust, hatred and delusion, 'cut them off at the root so that they are no more subject to arise in the future'. For such a person all notions of 'I' and 'mine' have been eliminated, and thus he or she no longer thinks in terms of the threefold conceit, 'I am better, I am equal, I am worse'. Like the chief disciple Sariputta, the arahant dwells 'with a heart that is like the earth, vast, exalted and measureless, without hostility and without ill

will'. Just as a rocky mountain cannot be shaken by a storm, so the arahant's mind cannot be disturbed by the changing procession of sense-objects, agreeable or disagreeable. The arahant dwells here and now in the unshakeable peace of deliverance, with the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion extinguished."

Visakha who lived in Rajagaha was a lay-disciple of the Buddha. With Visakha's permission his wife Dhammadinna joined the Order of bhikkunis. She meditated, progressed rapidly and before long became an Arhat. Once Visakha visited his former wife and plied her with difficult questions. She answered all of them, but when he questioned her about Nirvana, Dhammadinna noticed that Visakha was out of his depth. As he had not attained Nirvana, Visakha was incapable of understanding Enlightenment. So she requested him to go to the Buddha, if he wished to do so. When Visakha went to the Buddha and reported their conversation, the Buddha not only stated that she had answered Visakha's question correctly but the Master also confirmed that Dhammadinna was an Arhat.

"He who regards nothing as his own, whether it is about the past, present or future, who owns nothing and desires nothing of this world — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 421)

The alms offering made to the Buddha and the monks by King Pasenadi and Queen Mallika was very grand indeed. Unrivalled was the splendour of that ceremony. Over the head of each guest monk there was a white umbrella that was held by an elephant. Such sunshades were apparently used as a mark of reverence for the monks on this regal yet solemn occasion. When it was realised that they were short of one elephant for the ceremony, an untrained elephant was allotted to the Venerable Angulimala. Then there was a general feeling that this untrained elephant might become dangerously unruly. Surprisingly, the animal remained docile in the presence of Angulimala.

In response to the monks' questions about this incident, Angulimala remarked that he had not been frightened. The monks went to the Master and discussed this subject.

The Buddha said, "*Arhats such as Angulimala are fearless.*"

"The fearless, the noble, the heroic, the great sage, the victor, the desirless, the cleansed, the awakened — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 422)

When the Buddha was ill with a gastric ailment he requested the Venerable Upavana to fetch some hot water from Devahita. Immensely happy because of the rare privilege of being of some service to the Buddha, this devotee who was known as Devahita not only offered the required hot water but also some molasses. After the Buddha had had a warm bath, Upavana offered him a drink of hot water mixed with molasses. After taking it the Buddha's health improved. Then Devahita came and asked a question : For a gift to yield more benefit, to whom should it be offered ? The Buddha replied that an offering is most beneficial when the recipient of the offering is fully free from evil.

"He who knows his former lives, who sees both heaven and hell, who will never again be reborn, a sage who is perfect in knowledge and fully accomplished — Him do I call a Brahmana" (verse 423)

Conclusion

In all these verses the Buddha makes it abundantly clear that only the man or woman who attains Arhatship is the genuine brahmin. We can therefore conclude that the Arhat or genuine brahmin is the rare individual who finally frees himself or herself from all fetters, exhausts his or her karma and single-handedly finds the ultimate wisdom, freedom, peace and compassion that is Nirvana.

What a man or woman entangled in the net of samsara had failed to achieve throughout the preceding incalculable aeons

of time, that he or she succeeds in doing as an Arhat. What needed doing during his or her cycle of births and deaths and rebirths has at last been done. The weary pilgrim has come to the end of his very long and extremely arduous journey. It is a pilgrimage from which no pilgrim ever has to return. In fact he never returns. The Arhat has accomplished his task in the sense that he has put his own inner house in order. Never again, will there be any disorder for he has attained the unconditioned Nirvana.

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WHO IS A SINCERE FRIEND ?

During my schooldays I had a close friend. He was quite fond of me. Our relationship was purely platonic. We toured the entire island of Sri Lanka together. Once we were gazing at the swift-flowing waters of the Mahaveli which is the longest river in the land. There is a graceful bend in the brownish swollen river near Peradeniya where the lush tropical vegetation on the river banks is overshadowed by great towering bamboo. There I decided to take a dip. Despite my friend's warning against bathing in the Mahaveli, I waded into the water at my own risk.

"If you get into difficulties," shouted my friend, "I will jump into the river to save you. I'm prepared to sacrifice my life for you." Many years have passed since I had that refreshing bath but my friend's words on that occasion remain unforgettable. That good friend, alas, is no more. Interestingly, one day I chanced upon the following quotation :

"Greater love has none other than this, that he lays down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Friends who are faithful, devoted, loyal and self-sacrificing are rare and difficult to discover, but so-called friends who are utterly self-centred, unreliable and opportunistic are easy to find.

A miserable, homeless and penniless beggar in dirty rags used to sleep on the pavements of a city teeming with millions. He was a friendless and solitary man. Everyday people walked past him without so much as casting a quick glance at his

sorrowful face. But when the pauper won the national lottery (probably because of his generous deeds in a previous life) and became an instant multimillionaire, many claimed to be his friend. A total stranger even claimed to be his second cousin !

It is obviously important to examine all our so-called friendships with people and ascertain whether or not these relationships have been founded on selflessness or selfishness. Is he a true friend who deliberately ignores his friends just because the latter are having times of adversity ? Is he a genuine friend who makes overtures to people only in times when their fortune smiles ? Why do we like to hobnob with influential and powerful personalities such as famous politicians, actors, musicians, writers, sports players and business tycoons ? Is it not important and necessary to meditate on the hidden agenda behind any friendship ? In other words, what should be our criterion for judging the sincerity of any friendship ? Are we friendly with a person in order to give or to receive ? Of these two possibilities, the former indicates the existence of true friendship, especially if one is not having any ulterior motive whatsoever when giving or serving others.

It would never be a liability but always a great asset to have friends who are both wise and virtuous. But anyone who seeks friends with the twin attributes of wisdom and virtue will encounter a number of difficulties. The wise would probably prefer to spend their lives in solitude, after having fully outgrown the desire for human companionship. As regards paragons of virtue, finding such rare individuals would be as impossible as finding horses that can talk or sing. From a Buddhist standpoint, a perfect friend is necessarily a perfect person and a perfect person is necessarily an Arhat. Perfection is the most important attribute of Arhats for they alone have eliminated their karma once and for all. Does this mean that one should, in the relative absence nowadays of Arhats, be without friends altogether ? Yes, that would probably be the best course of action, provided one has the inner strength to lead a thoroughly independent life.

Loneliness is often unbearable. Many a person longs for friends. Great is his need to unburden himself to somebody. When there is this desperate need of contact with other people, one can and indeed should associate with pious persons who strictly follow the Dharma. Those who uncompromisingly observe the Pancha Sila, or at least seriously try to do so, would already have established some solid moral foundation. Those who always obey the five basic moral precepts, following their letter, and also understanding and complying with their spirit, can be counted as true friends.

Virtuous friends are a good influence on us. The very association with them results in the realisation of the importance of observing the Five Precepts. This question deserves to be discussed in some detail. What takes place when one makes these five resolutions? First, one becomes knowledgeable about the existence of certain high moral standards. Second, one becomes painfully conscious of one's failure to reach the required standards. Third, these resolutions are a powerful spur to action in the sense that one is forced to turn one's attention inwards. Fourth, when we meditatively watch our thought processes, what happens? Our hidden imperfections and latent tendencies begin to surface, enabling us to become aware of them. That very awareness results in the purification of the mind.

The observance of the *First Precept (to abstain from the destruction of living beings)* generates the virtues of Loving-Kindness (*Metta*) and Compassion (*Karuna*); it also helps to check the tendency to give vent to Anger (*Dosa*) that is often the motive for murder or the intentional killing of humans, and the intentional destruction of other living beings.

The observance of the *Second Precept (to abstain from stealing, or the taking of things that have not been given to oneself)* results in the aversion to material possessions and it also diminishes the power of Craving (*Tanha*) which is the primary cause of suffering and the continuation of the cycle of recurrent births.

The observance of the *Third Precept (to abstain from sexual misbehaviour)* should aid in the freedom from lustful desire (*Chandaraga*) which binds one to the world of the senses.

The observance of the *Fourth Precept (to abstain from false speech)* is one of the hallmarks of purity ; it also puts a very high premium on speaking the truth at all times and in all circumstances. It would be paradoxical if Buddhists, who are dedicated to discovering the ultimate Truth, ignore the importance of truthfulness by telling lies.

The observance of the *Fifth Precept (to abstain from doing anything that results in intoxication)* ensures the alertness of the mind, and hence its clarity, without which meditation becomes very difficult, if not impossible.

The comforting words of friends help us to get over bereavements. Friends can be a solace when there are emotional crises. Friends make us feel better when we are disappointed or in low spirits. Even the jokes and laughter of friends can lift up our flagging spirits but only temporarily. A real friend is someone who cares at all times. Yes, all these statements have an element of truth but the mutual pursuit of spirituality is the most important dimension to any true friendship. Such was the celebrated friendship between the two foremost disciples of the Buddha, namely, the Venerable Sariputta and the Venerable Moggallana.

The Mangala Sutta describes the Supreme Blessings. The word 'blessing' denotes the state of calm and well-being that is the natural outcome of leading a moral life. This special meaning is quite different from the theistic one wherein 'blessing' usually means 'act of grace' or 'gift of God'.

On one occasion when the Buddha was staying at the monastery of Anāthapindika, near Savatthi, a certain deity approached him when the night was far spent. The deity's splendour was such that it illuminated the entire grove. After saluting him, the deity proceeded to question the Exalted One about the Supreme Blessings. Among the other blessings that the Buddha mentioned on that occasion, he referred to the following one :

Asevana ca balanam
 Panditanan ca sevana
 Puja ca pūja-niyanam
 Etam mangala muttamam

Not to follow or associate with fools,

To associate with the wise,

And honour those who are worthy of honour,

This is the Supreme Blessing.

The Buddha, furthermore, in The Chapter of the Sevens, gave the following advice :

"A friend, O monks, should be followed when he possesses seven factors. What seven ? He gives what is difficult to give; he does what is difficult to do ; he patiently endures what is difficult to endure ; he reveals his own secrets ; he keeps one's secrets ; he does not abandon one in misfortune; he does not despise one because of one's loss. A friend should be followed when he possesses these seven factors"

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Some might say that "the aforementioned standards of moral excellence or perfection are impossible to achieve as these will always remain unattainable dreams". Our minds are so clever at making excuses for moving away from the path of purity. Stripping the mind of all its long accumulated taints is not by any means easy but unless we purify the mind, will it ever be possible to discover the Unconditioned and the Unborn ? In this connection we can reflect on the last words that the Buddha uttered — "*Subject to change are all composite things. Work out your own salvation with diligence*".

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DOES BUDDHISM CONDONE OR CONDEMN MEAT EATING ?

Eating meat was widely prevalent in India during the days of the Buddha. Yet there were certain religious sects such as the Niganthas whose commitment to the doctrine of harmlessness and non-injury (*Ahimsa*) was such that they abstained from meat altogether.

Jivaka, a vegetarian monk, asked the Buddha whether the consumption of meat was in accordance with his teachings. The Buddha is reported to have said that, provided animals were not seen, heard or suspected to have been *pecially* killed for a monk, their meat may be eaten. The killing of living creatures for an Enlightened Teacher or his disciples results in the formation of demerit or bad karma. Presumably, then, the only permissible kinds of meat should be from animals that have either not been *pecially* slaughtered for monks or whose deaths were caused by accident, illness or old age.

According to the *Jivaka Sutta* the Buddha declared that there are three instances in which meat must not be eaten — when it is seen, heard or suspected that a living being has been killed for a monk. In other words, meat may be eaten when it is not seen, not heard, and not suspected that a living being has been killed for a monk. Although this disciplinary rule applies only to monks, it is often taken to be applicable to all laypersons also.

For his survival a monk depends on the food he is offered. With a mind replete with loving-kindness, he spreads goodwill in all directions. So exalted is his inner state that the monk is

devoid of hostility and ill-will. He radiates loving-kindness to one and all. His all-embracing compassion has no frontiers. It is everywhere, above, below and around. What has been described is, or should be, a monk's inner state.

A householder or a householder's son would extend to the monk an invitation to a meal. Carrying his begging bowl and outer robe, the monk would go to the host's house and take the seat that has been prepared for him. Next the guest monk is served with good food. Then the monk does *not* think "How good it is that my hosts serve me with good food ! If only they serve me with such good food again !" Such negative and greed-driven thoughts do not, or should not, occur to him. But he partakes of the food without growing attached to it, without greed and without enthusiasm for food, for he sees the danger of attachment to anyone or anything and he also understands the importance of transcending all attachments.

In the *Jivaka Sutta* the Buddha taught that, whoever slaughters any living being for the Buddha or his disciples produces demerit in the following five instances : *First*, when he says "Go and bring me that living being" ; *Second*, when the creature experiences pain and distress in the course of being led along with a thong that afflicts its throat; *Third*, when he says "Go and kill it" ; *Fourth*, when the animal experiences pain and grief as it is being killed ; *Fifth*, when he offers the Buddha and his disciples with the above-mentioned food which is not permitted.

Do Buddhist monks nowadays take the trouble to enquire whether an animal was killed on purpose for them before eating its meat? They surely cannot be unaware of the fact that nearly all the available meat for consumption in modern cities comes from abattoirs. Since the monks are part and parcel of that *particular group* of meat consumers, does it not follow that the meat they devour with such relish was *specially* made available for them also ?

In most countries there are *special* shops in towns and villages that have in stock *special* supplies of meat and fish. Such *special* supplies are regularly or periodically made available for

sale only because there is a *special* demand from *special* groups of meat-eaters such as householders, restaurants, hotels, *monks* and the like. If there were no *special* demand for meat and fish, there would be no *special* supplies of them either.

Let us examine a situation wherein a man buys meat or fish in a shop casually, without first having placed a *special* order for them. Could such a consumer escape the karmic consequences of consuming what he bought? The customer, mark you, never made a *special* request for meat. Even so, it is probable that the customer incurs karmic responsibility because the customer in this case *could not have been unaware* of the fact that the shopkeeper had made a *special effort* to have additional meat and fish for unexpected clients such as himself who casually visit his shop.

If the only reason that makes me refrain from directly or indirectly killing animals for food is the fear that such actions result in the accumulation of demerit (*akusala karma*), then does it not indicate that I am *not* inspired by a compassionate concern for the suffering experienced by animals that are slaughtered, but rather by my egoism which is craving for so-called spiritual progress?

Let us remind ourselves of the *First Precept* of the Five Precepts (*Panca Sila*) that the vast majority of Buddhists recite frequently in a parrot fashion. Some love to recite them in public in order to create a very favourable impression of themselves, eagerly wanting the world to regard them as deeply religious persons! The very first moral precept is as follows: "I take the precept to abstain from the destruction of living beings" (*Panati-pata veramani sikkha padam samadiyami*). By taking the first precept, it is very clear that a true Buddhist resolves never to kill, which necessarily implies that one also resolves never to be a party to any deed involving the killing of a living being, regardless of whether the act of killing is done by oneself directly or done indirectly, by another person (such as a butcher or a fisherman), on behalf of oneself.

Since such so-called Buddhists are painfully conscious that the *first precept* of their great religion is "*I accept the precept not*

to kill", they hypocritically try to absolve themselves from all moral blame by imagining that they are not *vicariously* responsible for the destruction of life. For Buddhists, who eat fish, flesh and fowl, justify their degenerate dietary practices by resorting to the specious argument that it is the poor fisherman, butcher or hunter who is *solely* responsible for all the killing ! Hence it is maintained that demerit (*akusala karma*) is acquired only by those engaged in the actual act of killing ! These Buddhists are callously indifferent to the fact that they are encouraging these unfortunate groups of persons to amass unfavourable karma in the course of their occupations and thereby prolonging their misery in the cycle of births and deaths (*samsara*).

The eaters of meat and fish, instead of themselves doing the very disgusting work of killing, which would inevitably result in the creation of unfavourable karma, get others to do the killing on their behalf ! Can they really free themselves from karmic guilt by participating in *killing by proxy* ? Non-vegetarian Buddhists, alas, fail to understand that the wicked and immoral crime of killing still remains an immoral crime, regardless of whether it is committed by the non-vegetarians themselves or the paid professional killers who serve them.

Although the letter of the teachings permits meat eating under certain circumstances, its spirit is somehow more in harmony with vegetarianism than non-vegetarianism. Given the great importance that the Buddha attached to loving-kindness to all living beings, it is a great pity that he failed to enjoin the members of his Order and lay disciples to avoid meat under *all* circumstances. We have seen that he allowed the eating of meat only when an animal had not been *specially* slaughtered. For the helpless animals that are subjected to the agony of slaughter, does it make much difference whether they are being *specially* killed or otherwise ?

Regarding vegetarianism, let us examine whether or not there is a moral contradiction in the teachings of the Buddha.

Those who frown on vegetarianism like to quote from the *Amaganda Sutta*. The word "amaganda" means "the stench

emanating from fish and meat". When a brahmin confronts the Buddha and proceeds to refer to the bad and dangerous consequences of eating fish and flesh, the Buddha counters by referring at length to what he regards as the real moral defilements, such as anger, intoxication, deceit, envy, pride, non-payment of debts, slandering and the like. The list is quite long. There are a number of verses that specify some moral defilements. Most of the verses end with the recurring words — "...this is the defilement (i.e. moral defilement) from which the stench emanates, not the eating of meat". For example, "If any are without pity, given to backbiting, harming friends, heartless, proud, lacking in generosity — these are the defilements from which the stench emanates, not the eating-of meat"(verse 244).

When one reads the Amaganda Sutta for the first time, it gives a superficial impression of being an attack on vegetarianism. In a sense that is so ; however, its underlying message is very clear — a vegetarian diet, though never explicitly disallowed, is by itself just not good enough. A pure diet of vegetarian food will always remain very unsatisfactory, unless there is psychological purity as well. It is quite meaningless to live on meatless food, and to regard such a practice as a sign of purity, if one has psychological impurities at the same time.

Devadatta is frequently remembered in the Buddhist world as the Buddha's cousin. He later became the Buddha's rival and arch-enemy. He decided to confront the Master by making demands for the reform of the Order of monks (*Sangha*).

Devadatta insisted upon the following five reforms : *First*, that monks should spend their lives in forests; *Second*, that monks must live solely on alms, even refusing invitations from laypersons for meals; *Third*, that monks must wear rags; *Fourth*, that monks must live under trees and never enter rooms; *Fifth*, that monks must abstain from fish and meat.

The last of his proposals was a plea for the consumption of vegetarian food. On the whole Devadatta was requesting a return to the ascetic life of forest-dwelling mendicants.

Much to Devadatta's displeasure, the Buddha turned down his package deal. This decision of the Buddha has frequently been misconstrued as a rejection of vegetarianism. What the Buddha rejected was the *package deal*: it was a case of accepting all the proposals or rejecting them in toto. Had Devadatta pressed only for vegetarianism, leaving aside his other four proposals, it probably would have been granted. Therefore the Buddha's decision on this occasion was not necessarily an indication of his opposition to the practice of vegetarianism.

It is necessary to consider this question from what might have been the standpoint of the Buddha. Under the circumstances he had to reject the package deal which, if implemented, would have meant the eradication of the monastic system that the Buddha was keen on upholding. Had the Buddha accepted Devadatta's fourth proposal that monks must live under trees and never enter rooms, this idea would have dealt a serious blow to the monastic system.

The Buddha was not against the widely prevalent practice of meditating in the solitude of forests. He encouraged it. At the same time, the Buddha wanted to encourage the development of monasteries for monks. He allowed the donation of parks for the establishment of religious communities wherein monks were able to meditate indoors. Not every monk has the physical stamina to live alone in a forest, especially in roofless conditions. A case in point is the poor health of the old and frail monks. It became the practice for monks to seek shelter and protection against the elements, particularly during the monsoons. Even the wandering Jain ascetics, who at first were forest dwellers, later settled for a monastic system.

Nowadays monks, be they Buddhist or Jain, have the freedom to lead their lives in forests, if that is what they wish to do. What the Venerable Sariputta, the chief disciple of the Buddha, had to say about this matter is noteworthy: *"For the person whose senses are restrained, being under a roof or in a forest is immaterial, for he can meditate anywhere"*.

It is necessary to emphasise the fact that during the final phase of his long and illustrious life, the Buddha categorically condemned the consumption of meat.

In the Sanskrit version of the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* the Buddha declared : "*I instruct the disciples that from today onwards they should stop the eating of meat*".

This important instruction is mysteriously missing in the Pali version of this sutra ! Therefore some commentators have questioned the authenticity of the Sanskrit version and even suggested that this particular statement has been interpolated into this sutra. On the contrary, there is good reason to suspect that this significant saying has been deliberately deleted from the Pali version by non-vegetarians who relish the taste of meat.

After a monk has reluctantly renounced the delights of social life, stifling his longing for hearth and home and the passing excitements of sexual indulgence, if any, what else is left to sustain him psychologically during the solitary years of monastic life ? As the joyless recluse has so far failed to find the bliss of Enlightenment, he naturally tends to regard the plate of meat as the only remaining pleasure ! Those who crave for even a small slice of meat would feel inclined to bend the rules so that they could satisfy that craving and thereby assuage their deep-seated animalistic instinct for flesh. Man is an animal at heart, which explains this urge to rationalise his violence and anger (*Dosa*) and especially the wild passion to eat the filthy flesh of dead animals. Over the centuries what strange reasons have been adduced to support greed (*Tanha*), especially the greed for animal flesh ! Rather than eat curried carcasses, why not live on a healthy vegetarian diet consisting of milk, cheese, yoghurt, nuts, cereals, grains, herbs, fruits and vegetables ? Calm-inducing vegetarian food would be much more in accord with an austere lifestyle than the passion-arousing food of carnivorous creatures such as dogs and cats ; besides, it will combat the tendency of many a monk to become obese and lazy.

The *Lankavatara Sutra* consists of advice given by the Buddha to the Bodhisattva Mahamati on the abandonment of

the craving for meat. In this sutra a strong case has been made out for vegetarianism. Of the 24 principal arguments that have been advanced against the eating of meat, the following ones are striking :

"Meat is the food of the carnivorous and its smell is nauseating. I tell you this, Mahamati, do not eat it. Eating meat is non-meritorious : avoiding it is meritorious. Mahamati, you should understand the harmful effects that meat-eaters bring down on themselves."

"The yogi must refrain from eating flesh as he himself originated in flesh and also because the killed have to suffer in terror."

"Meat eating results in arrogance, which causes erroneous thoughts, which in turn results in greed. The mind is stupefied by greed. Afterwards there is attachment to stupefaction and hence no release from the cycle of births and deaths."

"Sentient beings are slaughtered for profit by people. Others buy the flesh. Both parties are evil-doers whose misdeeds will produce bad results in hell."

"The eating of flesh is contrary to the words of the Awakened One. Flesh-eaters are evil-minded. Such evil-doers are destined for the most horrible hell."

"No meat can be considered as being pure, even in these three respects — not planned or thought about beforehand, not requested and not forced. Therefore refrain from flesh-eating."

"Meat-eating is forbidden by me and by the Buddhas. Sentient beings who eat one another will be reborn as carnivorous animals."

"Meat-eaters stink. They deserve no respect. They lack intelligence."

"The Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Sravakas condemn meat-consumption."

"Those avoiding meat will be reborn as brahmins or yogis and endowed with knowledge and riches."

"Craving is just as much an obstacle to Enlightenment as meat-eating and taking alcohol."

*"In the future there might be people who foolishly remark,
'It is proper to eat meat and it is unobjectionable. The
Buddha permitted it'."*

"For all who are compassionate I forbid meat-eating at all places and at all times. Meat-eaters will be reborn as lions, tigers, wolves and the like."

"Therefore refrain from meat-eating as it will result in feelings of extreme fear. It will also be a hindrance to Emancipation. Such abstinence is the hallmark of the wise."

*** **

For centuries various Buddhists and Buddhist scholars have furiously debated whether the grave illness that preceded the Buddha's death was precipitated by the eating of pork (as the non-vegetarians maintain), or , by the eating of truffles (as the vegetarians insist). Probably the truth of the matter might always remain obscure or unknown. Indeed the available records of the Buddha's life and sayings are shrouded in a mist of legends, interpolations and deletions. But sometimes bright rays of light manage to penetrate the mist and give us an inkling of what the original teaching might have been, such as the following lines from *The Dhammapada* :

"All fear the rod ; all fear death.

Taking this into account,

One should neither kill nor cause to kill"

(verse 129)

"All fear the rod ; life is dear to all.

Taking this into account,

One should neither kill nor cause to kill"

(verse 130)

Therefore is it not incumbent upon every conscientious person to eat only such food in the production of which "one neither kills nor causes to kill" ?

Conclusion

There is abundant evidence that the Buddha, when he was a man of advanced years, denounced the practice of meat eating. That is the message for posterity from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and the *Lankavatāra Sūtra*. Why did the Buddha do a complete about-turn in this matter before he passed away? Evidently he realised that he had been mistaken. It is indeed a tribute to the Buddha's humility, honesty and integrity that he corrected himself. He thereby gave new guidelines relating to food for the benefit of both monks and laypersons.

The question as to whether or not meat should be consumed is very controversial. There are Buddhist texts that justify the consumption of meat but only if certain conditions are met. But the *Lankavatāra Sūtra* and the *Dhammapada* are highly critical of the heartless practice of killing animals for food. The *Lankavatāra Sūtra* eloquently denounces non-vegetarianism in no uncertain terms.

What is the standard by which one should evaluate the evidence? In a situation of this kind, must one stick to the letter of the texts or try to enter into the spirit of the teachings?

Any thought, word or deed that directly or indirectly results in the destruction of life is surely contrary to the spirit of Buddhism where much emphasis is placed on purity, non-violence, compassion and respect for life. One must therefore challenge the authenticity of all texts that are clearly contrary to the aforementioned spirit of the teachings. The spirit of the Dharma is heavily weighted in favour of vegetarianism.

It is deplorable that so few are moved by the plight of the poor, innocent and helpless animals that non-vegetarians thoughtlessly devour. These pitiful creatures might well have been our former friends or dear departed relations of previous existences. Do animal-eaters realise that the tasty pieces of fish, mutton, beef or chicken that they enjoy eating might well have come from the cruel slaughter of animals that had once been their loved ones of long-forgotten past lives? Are they aware that they are in a sense practising cannibalism? Do they feel

even an iota of sympathy for the suffering animals that are either expecting to be slaughtered or being slaughtered ? Therefore is it not important that those who have callously lived on such dreadful diets should consider this issue carefully ? When doing so, they should bear in mind the supreme importance of having the great virtues of loving-kindness (*Metta*) and compassion (*Karuna*) for not only humans but non-humans also.

Metta and *Karuna* are two of the four Sublime or Divine Abodes (*Brahma-Vihara*). It is in fact the all-embracing and boundless love for all sentient beings, which of course includes the various unfortunate animals that end up on our dining tables.

Much can be said in support of living on meatless meals, yet vegetarianism is much more than a mere ideology that upholds all animals' right to life. People are vegetarians for a thousand different reasons, but vegetarianism becomes an expression of our spirituality only when it is inspired by loving-kindness and compassion. Vegetarianism, in other words, will have the quality of sublime spirituality only when it springs from the purified inner states of loving-kindness (*Metta*) and compassion (*Karuna*).

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THE POWER OF PARITTA CHANTING

Those who hunger for truth have the freedom to wander around the gigantic garden that is Buddhism, savour its ethereal beauty and relish its numerous delicious fruits. There one can discover Paritta, the chanting-fruit, which heals the hearer and cures the cancer of samsaric servitude.

Paritta or "chantings for protection" are quite popular in several Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. "Paritta" is a collective term that specifically relates to certain sacred verses that are recited on special occasions. In the *Book of Parittas* there are altogether 29 long and short excerpts from the canonical scriptures in the ancient Pali language which is the lingua franca of Theravada Buddhism. Although these recitations are normally given by monks (*Bhikkus*) in public, even the laity have the freedom to recite them in the presence of others or in private. Incidentally, none has an exclusive monopoly of the teachings (*Dharma*), for whoever recites paritta cannot but participate in the noble deed of restating and solemnly asserting the timeless truths as taught by the Enlightened One.

There is a belief that whenever paritta is chanted, invisible celestial beings turn up in hordes not only to acquire merit themselves and thereby augment their reserves of good or favourable karma, but also to share the joy of listening to the Buddha's discourses. They listen reverentially as though the Buddha himself were personally present.

The people of the once prosperous city of Vesali were having trying times. Their sad situation was aggravated by a famine that caused deaths among the poverty-stricken inhabitants. The

ensuing pestilence resulted in even more deaths. The stench of decaying corpses attracted evil spirits. The crisis was completely out of control. When the Licchavi nobles heard that the Buddha was temporarily residing at Rajghat, they in their desperation decided to invite the Master. Accompanied by a large number of monks and his favourite disciple the Venerable Ananda, the Buddha crossed the Ganges and arrived at Vesali. Feeling great compassion for the sick and the suffering, the Buddha entered this polluted place. No sooner had he stepped into the city than it started raining very heavily. The rushing waters washed away the dirt and the dead. The air was purified. Thereupon the Buddha recited the *Ratana Sutta* to Ananda and instructed him not only to do likewise for the protection of its residents, but also to sprinkle throughout the streets the sanctified water from the Buddha's own begging bowl. The evil spirits fled the city, the pestilence disappeared and city life returned to normality.

The *Ratana Sutta* is as beautiful as it is profound. It is too long for reproduction in full, but this verse conveys something of its flavour :

Khinam puranam

navam natthi sambhavam

Viratta citta ayatike bhavasmin

Te khina-bija avirul-hicchanda

Nibbanti dhira yatha-yam padipo

Idampi sanghe ratanam panitam

Etena saccena suvatthi hotu

Their past is extinct, a fresh

becoming there is not,

their minds are not attached

to a future birth, their desires grow not ;

those wise ones go out even as this lamp.

In the Sangha is this precious jewel found.

On account of this truth

May there be happiness!

When the Pali scriptures are slowly and sonorously sung by monks, regardless of whether these recitations last only for a few hours or all-night, the lay listeners frequently experience a wonderful sense of well-being. There is a noticeable soothing effect on the nerves, especially if the listeners are suffering from much mental or emotional turmoil. The medical benefits of paritta are legion. Paritta can hasten the healing process. When, for example, a psychiatrist friend in New Zealand complained that some of his disturbed patients were violent and uncontrollable, I gave him a few paritta recitations on cassette which he later played back to them. This doctor informed me that most of the mentally ill were cured, thanks to the paritta. Chanting paritta also takes place on memorable occasions such as when moving into a new house or before going on a long voyage. The mere listening to these sacred sentences can boost the morale of many an anxious student before sitting an exam. For the same reason paritta is recited when a person takes a new job.

Paritta is popular primarily because of the widespread belief in the therapeutic value of hearing sacred chants. The vast majority think that the mere act of listening to the sound of selected scriptural sentences would somehow help them in an almost magical manner to ward off danger, disease and the like.

Readers are requested to refer to page 29 of this book wherein the text of the Angulimala Paritta is given. This paritta is usually recited in the presence of a pregnant woman to ensure a safe and painless delivery.

Does paritta fall into the category of japa ? Serious Buddhists do not as a rule engage themselves in the parrot-like practice of laboriously repeating words or phrases with the intention of attaining altered states of consciousness that are by their very nature not only short-lived but also self-induced. They are therefore not terribly interested in playing games with the mind, for they would rather be transcending once and for all the whole field of consciousness itself. Going *beyond* the mind is infinitely more important than using the mind for purposes such as experiencing bliss or having visions.

We have examined some of the advantages of listening to paritta. But all the benefits of paritta are secondary to its main aim which is the expression of certain ethical principles and philosophical truths. The power of paritta consists solely in the eternal verities embodied in these beautiful verses. Understanding these truths is the single most important factor in Illumination.

In their long quest for Enlightenment sadhakas have found it necessary to shun society and take refuge in havens of tranquillity. Even those who are not hermits occasionally feel the need to run away from the increasing tempo of modern life. What is the best place to go into retreat when seriously engaged in inner exploration ? Noiseless rooms or houses, quiet caves, undisturbed mountaintops, isolated beaches and river banks as well as secluded spots in the countryside are all environmentally conducive to contemplation and meditation. Significantly, yogis and rishis naturally feel drawn to deserted areas where nature smiles and silence reigns.

At the time of the Buddha in ancient India some 500 monks retreated to the jungle with the intention of practising meditation. Unfortunately they failed to find inner peace. The poor monks were disturbed and frightened by certain spirits. They were so scared stiff that they went to the Buddha and told him about their problem. The Buddha then delivered the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*. The Buddha asked his disciples to arm themselves with the sword of loving-kindness (*Metta*) and return to the forest. The monks acted accordingly, confronting the evil spirits with selfless love ; they radiated loving-kindness to the spirits who then repented of what they had done. The spirits, in fact, even paid their respects to the monks.

The point of this famous discourse is that nothing can surpass the all-pervasive power of love, which is called "loving-kindness" in Buddhist terminology. Primitive thoughts and emotions based on hate, revenge, retaliation and violence have no place whatsoever in a heart replete with loving-kindness. It might sound airy-fairy, but loving-kindness is in fact the Buddhist answer to violence and war. Loving-kindness is capable of

overpowering the dark deeds of others. It might seem a bit bizarre, but it is actually possible to radiate loving-kindness and thereby help to eradicate anger in others.

The Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda has translated from Pali into English the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, which is frequently chanted.

Karaniya Metta Sutta

1

*He who is skilled in doing good and
Who wishes to attain that state of calm
(i.e. Nibbana) should act thus.
He should be able, upright, perfectly upright,
Obedient, gentle and humble.*

Karaniya mattha kusalena
Yantam santam padam abhi-samecca
Sakko uju ca suju ca
Suvaco cassa mudu anatimani

2

*Contented, easily looked after,
(i.e. not a burden to others)
With few duties, simple in livelihood.
Controlled in senses, discreet, not impudent;
Not greedily attached to families.*

Santussako ca subharo ca
Appa-kicco ca sallahuka-vutti
Santindriyo ca nipako ca
Appa-gabbho kulesu ananu giddho

3

*He should not commit any slight wrong,
So that other wise men might find fault in him.*

*May all beings be happy and safe,
May their hearts be wholesome.*

Naca khuddham samacare kinci
Yena vinnu pare upava-deyyum
Sukhino va khemino hontu
Sabbe satta bhavantu sukhi-tatta

4

*Whatsoever living beings there are;
Feeble or strong, long, stout or medium,
Short, small or large, seen or unseen.*

Ye keci pana bhu-tatthi
Tasava thavara va anava sesa
Digha va ye mahanta va
Majjhima-rassa-kanuka thula

5

*Those dwelling far or near,
Those who are born and those
Who are to be born.
May all beings, without exception,
Be happy minded.*

Dittha va yeva addittha
Ye ca dure vasanti avidure
Bhuta va sambhavesi va
Sabbe satta bhavantu sukhi-tatta

6

*Let no one deceive another nor despise any
Person whatsoever in any place.
In anger or ill-will,
Let him not wish any harm to another.*

Na paro param nikubbetha
 Nati-mannetha katthaci nam kanci
 Byaro-sana patigha-sanna
 Nanna-mannassa dukkha-miccheyya

7

*Just as a mother would protect her
 Only child at the risk of her own life,
 Even so let him cultivate a boundless heart
 Towards all beings.*

Mata yatha niyam puttam
 Ayusa eka-putta-manu rakkhe
 Evampi sabba bhutesu
 Manasam-bhavaye apari-manam

8

*Let thoughts of boundless love pervade the
 Whole world; above, below and across
 Without any obstruction,
 Without any hatred, without any enmity.*

Mettanca sabba lokasmin
 Manasam-bhavaye apari-manam
 Uddham adho ca tiriyanca
 Asam-badham averam asa-pattam

9

*Whether he stands, walks, sits or lies down,
 As long as he is awake,
 He should develop this mindfulness.
 This, they say is the Highest conduct here.*

Tittham caram nisinno va
 Sayano va yava tassa vigata middho

Etam satim adhittheyya
 Brahma metam viharam idha-mahu
 10

*Not falling into error,
 Virtuous and endowed with insight,
 He discards attachment to sensuous desires.
 Truly, he does not come again;
 To be conceived in a womb.*

Ditthinca anupa gamma silava
 Dassa-nena sampanno
 Kamesu vineyya gedham
 Nahi jatu gabbha seyyam punaretiti

*By the firm determination of this truth
 May I ever be well.*

Etena sacca vajjena
 Sothi me hotu sabbada

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Those bearing ill will towards others are incapable of radiating loving-kindness, hence the preliminary need for self-purification. In the course of going on that long inner voyage of self-exploration one inevitably jettisons undesirable personality traits, frustrations, resentments, ambitions, aversions, avarice and the like. Only after throwing aside such useless psychological baggage is one ready to travel light and go very far.

According to the *Mettanisamsa Sutta*, the presence of loving-kindness results in peaceful sleep, peaceful getting out of bed and the absence of disturbing dreams; one becomes loveable to both humans and non-humans; one is protected by deities; fire, poison and weapons will do no harm; the mind becomes calm and the face bright; at death there is mental clarity; if

Arhatship is not attained in this life, rebirth in a Brahma world takes place.

Although the scriptures make reference to the advantages of loving-kindness, strictly speaking, it is in a sense dangerous to be influenced by the knowledge of these benefits, when giving expression to loving-kindness. Unless there is total indifference to the fruits of one's actions, new karma gets created. Only motiveless, thought-free deeds are pure and not corrupted by the stain of karma. The Buddha has clearly explained that any volitional act results in the creation of karma : "*I declare that volition (chetana) is karma*". In practical terms, one can say that only those deeds that are spontaneous outpourings of the purified heart and mind, devoid of ulterior motives, without any expectation of reward or merit whatsoever, bear the hallmarks of genuine loving-kindness. Pure love does not ask for any reward for loving. The state of selfless loving, if it exists, is its own reward.

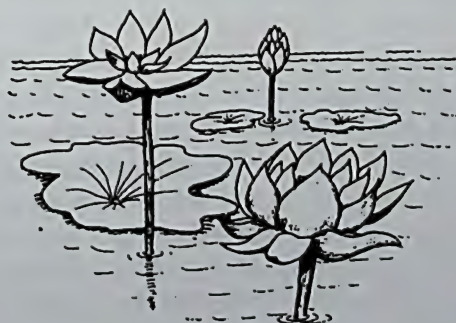
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OUR DEBT OF GRATITUDE TO OUR PARENTS

Our parents were instrumental in bringing about many improvements in our lives. We owe our very existence to them, and so we will always be in debt to them. Is it possible to release oneself from this debt ?

Numerous indeed are parents' acts of self-sacrifice. They sacrifice their time, energy and money so that their children have the advantage of a good education; they provide the basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter, and much more, in order that their offspring can live in comfort; when there are outbreaks of epidemics they minister to their sick children; they love to cheer up their sons and daughters who are in low spirits; they constantly counsel children with psychological problems; wealthy and thoughtful parents sometimes build special vacation homes for their children; and above all, conscientious parents give children spiritual books and thereby stimulate interest in leading lives that are morally right and good.

Modern parents have to dissuade young persons from becoming addicted to hallucinogenic drugs, tobacco and alcohol. The younger generation should be taught to avoid gambling like the plague. Parents would be failing in their duty if they do not explain to their kids that promiscuous behaviour is detrimental to health; it is also contrary to traditional moral values. We often hear the expression 'becoming proud parents' as if the act of mothering or fathering a child were a great achievement ! Any raging beast who sleeps around can become a father many times over. Whereas any fellow who behaves

irresponsibly can produce progeny and thereafter neglect to exercise due care, only parents with a great sense of responsibility would play a major role in introducing a spiritual dimension to the lives of children under their charge.

We are living in a pleasure-orientated world wherein the institution of marriage seems to be falling into decline. Because of matrimonial difficulties and other reasons the divorce rate is increasing, which in turn results in one-parent or single-parent families. In such families, provided the roles of father and mother are rolled into one, a child's sense of deprivation can be somewhat lessened. Similarly, a child without biological parents is not necessarily filled with a sense of loss so long as a boy or girl in this situation is showered with affection and unfailing support. In our so-called highly civilised societies there are also, alas, thousands of children who were orphaned in various wars. These pitiful children are an eloquent testimony to our love of violence and our basic barbarism. It is proof that we are anything but gentle and loving human beings. Incidentally, what moral right have we to procreate, given that we are so wicked ?

It is not by choice that one is born into a particular family. We cannot select our parents or our family members. We do not know the karmic reasons why some have biological parents, whereas others have adoptive ones. It says a lot about the workings of the law of karma that we have had no say whatsoever in these matters. It is possible that we were closely associated with our parents in previous lives, either as our nearest relations or as our closest friends. It is well known that strong attachments to people formed in past lives can continue in the present and future ones.

We have hitherto considered the question of the duty of parents to act in the best interests of their children, but the far more important issue is the following : *What is the most excellent way to do one's duty when caring for the ageing parents ?* Incidentally, the expression 'acting out of duty' is often used but unfortunately it is suggestive of a certain lack of warm feelings. Therefore it is necessary to pose the question : Do I 'care' for my parents, only because I feel duty-bound, or am I

sincerely concerned about my parents out of deep affection for them ? In other words, do I force myself 'to care' for my parents just to avoid the emergence of a conscience-stricken emotional state ?

Once I made the acquaintance of a very successful middle-aged lawyer who used to refer rudely to his parents as 'that old woman' and 'that old man'. After he had quarrelled with them he ran away from home during his adolescence. When his dear mother became the mistress of her boss, her father separated from her and he hit the bottle. The lawyer treated his parents with contempt and avoided meeting them even in times of crisis. When his poor father suffered a severe heart attack he refused to visit him in hospital. He could at least have offered a few words of comfort to his ailing father. When I strongly advised the lawyer to overlook all the past failings of his parents and stressed the importance of being a forgiving son, he became very argumentative as though he were addressing a court. Finally he asked me to mind my own business ! Never must one bear resentment towards any human being, especially one's parents, even if their state is one of utter moral degradation.

The Buddha taught that parents must be treated with the respect that they always deserve :

"Those families ,O monks, dwell with Brahma where at home the parents are respected by their children. Those families dwell with the ancient teachers where at home the parents are respected by their children. Those families dwell with the ancient deities where at home the parents are respected by the children. Those families dwell with those worthy of worship where at home the parents are respected by their children.

'Brahma', monks, is a term for father and mother. 'The early teachers' is a term for father and mother. 'The early deities' is a term for father and mother. 'Those worthy of worship' is a term for father and mother. And why ? Parents are of great help to their children, they bring them up, feed them and show them the world."

The Venerable Sariputta along with the Venerable Moggallana were the two chief disciples of the Buddha. Moggallana is best remembered for his extraordinary psychic powers ; he excelled all other monks in this field. The karmic reason for Moggallana's tragic demise is traceable to his past patricidal and matricidal deeds.

In one of his former lives Moggallana had a young wife who was unfortunately hell bent on getting rid of her oid and blind parents-in-law (i.e. Moggallana's own parents). Legend has it that she was very jealous of the fact that all her husband's attention was being given to his sick and elderly parents, instead of herself becoming the object of his attention. When she therefore commanded her husband to kill his parents, he hesitated at first but later agreed to do it. One morning he secretly took his parents in a cart into a forest and left it there. After some time he returned to the scene and started mimicking the sounds and voices of a gang of robbers ! Next while beating his parents, he tried to create the impression that all these violent deeds were being perpetrated by robbers. By this means he deceived his unsuspecting parents. Being blind, they believed that their son had all the time been present with them.

"Son, flee now, flee," they shouted out, cautioning him to protect himself from robbers. How they loved Moggallana !

How paradoxical that he was clubbing his parents to death at the same time that his parents were trying to preserve their son's life !

Despite his exalted spiritual status as an Arhat, Moggallana had to pay dearly for killing his parents in a previous life. None can succeed in avoiding the relentless power of the law of karma. In his last life Moggallana twice managed to escape from robbers who wanted to attack him. On account of his supernatural powers he escaped through a keyhole. On the third occasion, however, he decided to yield to their violence. Moggallana knew that he had to resign himself to the inevitable. The law of karma was, as it were, determined to avenge Moggallana for his terrible murder of his parents in a former

life. They caught him and beat him severely. He was on the verge of death but before dying he visited the Buddha for the last time. As a general rule, parents are much loved and revered by their children in most civilised parts of the world. It is inconceivable that Moggallana had carefully planned and executed such a heinous crime.

The Buddha spoke of parents in glowing terms and reminded us of our enormous debt of gratitude to them :

"I declare, O monks, that there are two persons one can never repay. What two ? One's mother and father."

"Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and while doing so should live a hundred years, reach the age of a hundred years; and if one should attend to them by anointing them with salves, by massaging, bathing and rubbing their limbs, and they should even void their excrements there—even by that would one not do enough for one's parents, one would not repay them. Even if one were to establish one's parents as the supreme lords and rulers over this earth so rich in the seven treasures, one would not do enough for them, one would not repay them."

"But, O monks, one who encourages his unbelieving parents, settles and establishes them in faith; who encourages his immoral parents, settles and establishes them in virtue; who encourages his stingy parents, settles and establishes them in generosity; who encourages his ignorant parents, settles and establishes them in wisdom — such a one, O monks, does enough for his parents: he repays them and more than repays them for what they have done"

Anguttara Nikaya II iv 2

There is a famous Buddhist maxim that the gift of the Dharma exceeds all other gifts. There is no greater favour that we can do to our parents than that of introducing them to the

teachings of the Enlightened One. In Buddhist lands it is very probable that parents already have a scanty knowledge of the Dharma, in which case their interest in it can be stimulated so that they would want to delve deeper into the teachings. They should be presented with spiritual literature and taken to lectures, meetings and various societies where Buddhist topics are discussed. Elderly persons may lack the incentive for studying serious subjects or for visiting temples for the purpose of conversing with learned or pious monks, however they can be informed about interesting forums for religious discussions as well as religious discourses (*Bana sermons*) on the radio. Many are the methods of showing them the path of purity and righteousness.

The spiritual advice that sons and daughters offer their parents might fall on deaf ears. Some parents find it difficult to regard their adult offspring as grown-ups. In such a situation it is best to teach by example rather than by precept. Parents might want to become keen followers of their progeny, if the latter are paragons of virtue, one never knows.

If parents have got into the habit of grumbling about their health or complaining about people who are annoying, one should of course give the parents a hearing, but it is also necessary to tell them that suffering is part and parcel of samsara. If parents are stingy and excessively attached to their possessions, one can advise them that the wealth one acquires in life is not for selfish storing but for selfless sharing with the poor and the deserving. They will learn a lot about the virtue of generosity when they see their children giving alms not only to the needy but also to ascetics, monks and nuns. Parents can be shown the sheer joy of being helpful to homeless people and refugees from war zones. When parents notice that their offspring have achieved true happiness by leading chaste lives, they will start pondering over their past romantic escapades and regret their extra-marital affairs. As a general rule it is the parents who preach to their progeny the virtues of abstaining from sex, but there are times when children can convincingly demonstrate to their parents that peace of mind is the fruit of moral purity.

Their memory should live on after our beloved parents have passed away ; never must they be relegated to the limbo of forgotten things, for it is the long established practice in Buddhist lands to remember them regularly. In their name people make donations to charity, or there are regular giving of alms; food is lavishly served to monks, nuns, friends, relations and animals; the merit accumulated from such deeds is then transferred to those loved ones who are no longer with us.

When such meritorious deeds are being performed for the benefit of deceased parents, with all one's heart and mind one solemnly says, "May my dear departed mother and my dear departed father be well and happy ! Wherever they may be at present, may they be full of joy ! May they attain Nirvana !"

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WHAT IS NIRVANA?

The attainment of Nirvana or spiritual Liberation is the religious aspiration of every Buddhist. It is the summum bonum : the highest or the supreme good.

Since desirelessness or the freedom from all attachments is one of the principal characteristics of this exalted state of Nirvana, one can raise a philosophical objection at the very outset of our inquiry : Does it not seem contradictory to desire the state of desirelessness ? Don't Buddhists look rather absurd when they start craving for that dimension of Quiet wherein there is no craving whatsoever ? Through the instrumentality of the conditioned mind will it ever be possible to attain the Unconditioned ? The problem is compounded because the very statement 'conditioned mind' emanates from the mind's own conditioned state. Expressed differently, the question is as follows : Will the mind, given its self-centred mess, ever be a party to throw off once and for all its own karma ? Questions of this kind are difficult, if not impossible, to answer, especially because the spiritual dimension of Nirvana is not comprehensible to the intellect with all its prejudices, predispositions, impurities and the like. Similarly, questions relating to the infinite distances of space, the nature of time or timeless eternity, are beyond the capacity of the mind. Nevertheless, we can at least make guesses about Nirvana, useless though they are in a sense, for surely there is no substitute for *actually experiencing* Illumination oneself. Fools such as ourselves like to discuss the subject but, strictly speaking, only the Buddhas and the Arhats are truly qualified to talk about Nirvana.

The Sanskrit word 'Nirvana' literally means 'blown out', 'extinguished' (as a fire or a lamp), 'set as the sun', 'calmed', 'quieted', 'tamed', 'dead', 'deceased', 'lost', 'disappeared', 'immersed', 'plunged', and 'immovable'. The Pali word 'Nibbana' has the following meanings: 'freedom from desire', 'cooling', 'emancipation' and 'the final bliss'. All these terms are worthy of consideration as they help to convey something of the flavour of Nirvana.

Often in Buddhist literature the Nirvanic state is only indirectly indicated. There are numerous fascinating allusions to Nirvana. Such information is only helpful for us to think of Nirvana in abstract terms. Is it really possible to describe the indescribable? The safer course is to state what Nirvana is *not* than what it actually is.

Samsaric servitude entails entanglement in the sorrowful cycle of births and deaths. Sorrow is inseparable from life. Suffering is our lot. Who can escape from the clutches of suffering? There is suffering at both birth and death as well as during life itself. It is symbolically significant that babies cry when leaving the womb and entering this so-called wonderful world. Separation from loved ones causes suffering; association with unpleasant persons results in suffering; without some suffering it is not possible to pass an examination, and failing an examination also creates suffering; those who have to join the ranks of the unemployed have to suffer, but there is suffering even in the process of succeeding in finding a job and earning one's living thereafter; the physical and mental discomforts of the sick and the dying are forms of suffering. Our brief respites from suffering are termed 'happiness', but such periods, alas, are short-lived. The attainment of Nirvana is immediately followed by the cessation of suffering. Let us therefore cross the karmic stream of *becoming*. On the opposite bank of the stream there is neither birth nor death.

On one occasion a wanderer approached the Venerable Sariputta, the foremost disciple of the Buddha, and said, "Friend Sariputta, it is said, 'Nibbana', 'Nibbana'. What now is Nibbana?"

Sariputta replied, "*The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion : this, friend, is called Nibbana*".

Samyutta Nikaya 38 : 1

In answer to a question posed by the thoughtful brahmin Janussoni, the Buddha himself declared :

"When, brahmin, a person is impassioned with lust ... depraved through hatred ... bewildered through delusion, overwhelmed and infatuated by delusion, then he plans for his own harm, for the harm of others, for the harm of both; and he experiences in his mind suffering and grief. But when lust, hatred and delusion have been abandoned, he neither plans for his own harm, nor for the harm of others, for the harm of both; and he does not experience in his mind suffering and grief. In this way, brahmin, Nibbana is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise"

Anguttara Nikaya 3 : 55

The teaching is very clear. The flower of Nirvana blooms only in the purified soil wherein lust, hatred and delusion have all been weeded out completely. There is, in addition, the probability of finding spiritual Illumination immediately, in this very life, provided of course one succeeds in cleansing oneself on the aforementioned lines.

A deep understanding of the Anatta doctrine is an essential prerequisite for the attainment of Nirvana. This particular teaching makes Buddhism different from all other religions. It is necessary to delve into this question with patience and open-mindedness because various commentators have frequently misunderstood and misrepresented the doctrine of Anatta, which can be described as the fundamental truth of non-ego, egolessness, non-self or impersonality.

Before discussing the question of impersonality, let us be clear about what exactly is meant by 'ego' or 'personality'. Either within our psychophysical organism or outside it, is there anything that is changeless, indestructible, self-existing and

eternal ? If there were anything that is changeless, indestructible, self-existing and eternal, we can ascribe personality, permanence and immortality to it.

Before examining the mind-body combination that is identified as 'me', we can consider the composition of any external object. A bicycle, for instance, appears to be a self-existing object, but actually it owes its existence to certain workers who, like the bicycle, are also subject to change, decay and eventual death or destruction. Neither the bicycle nor our psychophysical organisms can exist forever. Neither is capable of eternal life. Besides, neither has the attributes of personality and permanence. A bicycle comes into existence only when we have put together its various parts such as its handlebar, crossbar, seat, wheels, tyres, pedals, chains and brakes. The bicycle is only a temporary assemblage of things which in themselves are all subject to change, decay and disappearance. Similarly, all the constituent parts of our psychophysical organisms are also subject to alteration and demise.

Our minds consist of collections of concepts. Some thoughts are buried in the hidden depths of the psyche, while other thoughts are given to surfacing easily. The stream of thought, like the wild waters of a restless river, flows ceaselessly. The stream is hardly motionless but in a constant state of movement. The 'mind' certainly has the semblance of permanency when in truth it is always in a state of flux. Because we are not perceptive enough we fail to see that our minds are nothing more than constantly changing combinations of thoughts; hence the illusion that the mind is a permanent entity. The idea of 'mind' is really a mirage. In our everyday lives we have to use words such as 'mind' and 'I' as it facilitates communication between people, but philosophically speaking, both 'mind' and 'I' have no real existence as abiding entities.

The rare release called Nirvana becomes a distinct possibility only when there is a deep insight into the illusory nature of the mind and the ego.

The illusion of mind is closely interrelated to the illusion of 'I', especially because it is in the womb of the mind that the

cunning 'I' is conceived; naturally, it is the mind that continuously provides the ego with adequate nourishment for its survival.

The 'I'-thought is the root of all evil. Basically, the urge to exploit others to further one's selfish ends springs from the ego. Selfishness is the pathway to the acquisition of wealth, whereas selflessness is the road to the renunciation of riches and the evolution of an altruistic and caring society. 'My caste', 'my race', 'my country', 'my family' and all other ego-based thoughts and emotions have throughout history not only antagonised otherwise friendly people but also led the way to social conflicts, bloodshed and wars. If anybody deserves to be denounced as 'the devil' or 'the supreme sinner', it is surely the 'I'. Just a trace of egoism is enough to spoil any sublime virtue such as charity, generosity, affection or compassion. So insatiable is the ego's thirst for recognition, fame, power, position and prestige that it makes people assertive, aggressive and ruthless. The presence of the 'I' makes us self-centred : its total absence, selfless saints.

The Buddha delivered a discourse on the very subject under consideration here. *Cularahulovada Sutta* was addressed to the Venerable Rahula, the Buddha's only offspring, at Savatthi in Anathapindika's Park. On that memorable occasion, according to the scriptures, many thousands of deities were present, thinking that the Enlightened One would guide Rahula further to Nirvana by helping him to destroy his defilements.

The Buddha : "*Rahula, what do you think ? Is the eye permanent or impermanent ?*"

Rahula : "Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

The Buddha : "*Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness ?*"

Rahula : "Suffering, Venerable Sir."

The Buddha : "*Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?*"

Rahula : "No, Venerable Sir."

The Buddha : *"Are any feeling, any perception ... any consciousness that arise with eye-contact ... permanent or impermanent?"*

Rahula : *"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."*

The Buddha : *"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"*

Rahula : *"Suffering, Venerable Sir."*

The Buddha : *"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?"*

Rahula : *"No, Venerable Sir."*

In a similar vein the Buddha continued to ask whether or not there is such a thing as 'my self' in any of the other doors of perception.

The Buddha : *"Rahula, what do you think? Is the ear permanent or impermanent?... Is the body permanent or impermanent?... Are any feeling, any perception, any consciousness that arise with mind-contact ... permanent or impermanent?"*

Majjhima Nikaya 147

The Buddha drew attention to the fact that whatever is impermanent and subject to change, such as *all* the experiences and thoughts and feelings of this psychophysical organism, given their transitoriness, cannot be rightly regarded as 'this is my self'.

Rahula realised the truth that is inherent in this 'no-self' teaching. He became disenchanted not only with his sense organs but also with all states of consciousness. Disenchantment with 'I' or 'self' resulted in dispassion or calmness. There was Liberation or the freedom from all attachments which is the state of timeless Silence. Ceasing to cling to anything, he attained the peace of Nirvana.

In a sense, the statement that the self is reduced to nothing and annihilated with the attainment of Nirvana is not correct. The word 'annihilation' is a misnomer because, in the first place, how can one eliminate something that does not exist? With

Nirvana there appears to be an eradication of the self, or, more precisely, a remarkable realisation that there was never such a thing as the self.

Just like an old and withered branch that suddenly falls from a tree, the illusory self drops to its death the moment one sees through it.

Although no verbal description can ever convey the essence of that transcendental and exalted state of Nirvana, in the *Udana* one can get a fascinating glimpse of it, for the Buddha towards the end of his life addressed his monks as follows :

"O Bhikkus, there is an abode that is not born, that has no origin, that is not made, and that is not conditioned. O Bhikkus, if there were not this unborn, unoriginated, unformed and unconditioned state, then there would be no escape from your present state which is subject to birth, which has an origin, which is put together and also conditioned. You can extricate yourself from it as there is this absolutely unconditioned abode that is untouched by causation."

The supramundane and imperishable state of Nirvana can be attained here and now, in this very life; it is therefore quite different from the concept of an eternally blissful state in a celestial realm that is realisable only in the hereafter. Nirvana is neither a gift from any god nor a Supreme Being, but just an occurrence that is causeless : that is to say, it is outside the field of cause and effect (*Karma*). The Buddha taught that any volitional act results in the creation of karma : "*I declare that volition (chetana) is karma*". Whereas in Sanskrit the word 'chetana' can mean consciousness, in Pali it denotes 'volition'. Any deed that is propelled by a motive, determined by a psychological trait, causes the formation of karma. This means that only motiveless pure deeds are without the stain of karma. The sayings and doings of liberated individuals such as Buddhas and Arhats are absolutely devoid of karma as they emanate from the unconditioned Nirvanic dimension of pure being, which is in contradistinction to the conditioned state of karmic becoming. Nirvana occurs when the chain of karma breaks once and for all. The generation of karma suddenly stops.

All things are either conditioned by causes (*Samkhata*) or not conditioned by causes (*Asamkhata*). Anything that is conditioned is governed by three characteristics — they arise, they disappear and they change. Thus every conditioned thing is subject to change and disappearance. This universal law is applicable to both mind and matter. Even the most minute speck in the universe is in a state of 'constant becoming' if one may use such a paradoxical expression. But Nirvana alone, because it is not conditioned by causes, is birthless, changeless and deathless. Therefore it is fair to say that Nirvana is the only Reality : all else is unreal (*Maya*).

Is Nirvana a non-dualistic state in the Vedantic sense ? The Buddha explained that in Nirvana there is a transcending of 'the Realm of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception'. This attainment is even beyond our intellectual grasp especially because we have not gone thus far.

Evidently, Nirvana is not only *beyond* non-duality but also *beyond* all states of consciousness. One can draw this inference from the following conversation between Sariputta and his friend Udayi :

Sariputta : "*Nirvana is happiness ! It is happiness !*"

Udayi : "How can there be happiness if there is no sensation ?"

Sariputta : "*The absence of sensation is itself happiness.*"

Paradoxically, the experience of Nirvana cannot be experienced because there is no 'experiencer' or 'I' to experience it.

To find Nirvana is it better to channel one's energies outwards or inwards? Is it better to seek external assistance and pray or to be utterly self-reliant and inquire within oneself ?

The Venerable Nagasena explained in *The Questions of King Milinda* that although Nirvana is not situated in any specific spot, yet Nirvana *is*. In the same way that fire is not stored up in any particular place but arises when the required conditions are satisfied, Nirvana cannot be found in any particular place, yet it is attained when the necessary requirements are met.

Difficult though it was, Nagasena tried hard to describe the nature of Nirvana in a series of similes :

"As a lotus in bloom remains dry in water, Nirvana remains stainless and immaculate with no defilements whatsoever"

"Nirvana can be likened to water that washes out defilements and dissolves craving"

"Nirvana can be likened to medicine that detoxifies those poisoned by defilements ; it is a cure for suffering. Nirvana is ambrosia — the food of the gods imparting immortality"

"Nirvana is free from impurities. Nirvana can be likened to the ocean that is mighty and boundless ; like the ocean that does not fill despite the waters of the rivers that merge with it, Nirvana is not enlarged because of the beings who enter it. Nirvana, the dwelling of the Arhats, is decorated with the fine flowers of purity, wisdom and Liberation."

"Nirvana can be likened to the life-sustaining food with which one can overcome old age and death ; it increases spiritual strength ; it gives the beauty of holiness ; it wipes away the stains and their attendant suffering"

"Nirvana can be likened to space that is neither born nor dies; it does not disappear in one place and reappear in another ; it is invincible ; it cannot be stolen ; it remains unattached ; it is the sphere wherein Arhats move; none can put obstacles in its way. Nirvana stretches away into infinity"

"Nirvana can be likened to a wish-fulfilling gem that gives great joy. Nirvana has the lustre of a gem"

"Nirvana can be likened to red sandalwood that is difficult to find ; its fragrance is beyond compare. Red sandalwood is acclaimed by the good ; similarly, Nirvana is praised by the Noble Beings"

"Nirvana, like ghee, has special qualities. The sweet perfume of ghee can be likened to the sweet perfume of virtue which is part and parcel of Nirvana. The delicious taste of ghee is the same as the delicious taste of Enlightenment that is Nirvana"

"Nirvana can be likened to the lofty summit of an extremely exalted mountain. This mountain peak of Nirvana is immovable. It is also inaccessible in the sense that Nirvana is far beyond the reach of the defilements. There no defilements can ever germinate. The realm of Nirvana, like the mountain top, is free : neither is there any bias in favour of anything nor any bias against anything"

When the good king asked whether there is any place on which a person might stand and attain Nirvana, Nagasena replied : *"Yes, that place is virtue"*. Unless one is grounded in virtue it will not be possible to realise it.

Since Nirvana can be realised only *within ourselves* it is absolutely imperative to purify ourselves thoroughly and make preparations for it. That is surely the first step on the road leading to the Ultimate. We have to cleanse away, as already mentioned, all the long accumulated impure traits such as selfishness, jealousy, hatred, craving, spitefulness and pride. The list of psychological pollutants, so to speak, is lengthy. Rather than speculate about Enlightenment, we should at least begin the quest for it by putting our own houses in order.

No words can adequately convey the nature of Nirvana but something of its flavour is given in the following extracts from a few important Buddhist sources. Probably the finest description of Nirvana is contained in the *Udana* which takes the form of a series of negative statements :

"O brothers ! There is a home where there is no earth nor water nor air."

"There is a home, O brothers ! where there is no world of infinity-of-space nor world of infinity-of-intelligence nor world of cognition or non-cognition nor this world nor the world yonder, neither sun nor moon."

"That home, O brothers ! has neither coming nor going, neither birth nor death. That has neither an origin nor an annihilation and it is beyond thought. The ending of sorrow is that."

"That home, O brothers ! is unborn, uncreated, unmanifested and unconditioned ... That home is Nirvana."

According to the *Lankavatara Sutra* "Nirvana cannot be discovered by mental searching..."

The *Suttanipata* states : "That monk of wisdom here, free of desire and passion, finds deathlessness, peace, the changeless state of Nirvana ... The steadfast go out like this lamp ... Where there is nothing, where nothing is grasped, this is the Isle of No-beyond. I call it Nirvana — the absolute elimination of ageing and dying."

The *Samyutta -Nikaya* also tries to describe it thus "The ending of becoming is Nirvana ... It is called Nirvana because craving is discarded."

In the *Ariya Pariyesana Sutra* the Buddha contrasted the transitoriness of mundane pursuits with Nirvana which alone is eternal and hence worthy of attaining. There are, he said, two quests — the noble and the ignoble. Man, being himself subject to decay, disease, sorrow and death, is given to the pursuit of ignoble things such as wanting a wife, children, property and so forth. All such activities are fleeting and impermanent. But the quest for Nirvana is noble as it alone is *not* subject to decay, disease, sorrow and death.

There is an unmistakable suggestion that Nirvana is a state of deathless bliss in contradistinction to our states of insecurity, misery and suffering which are all concomitants of samsara.

Etymologically, the word 'Nirvana' means 'blown out' : *nir* stands for the negative and *va* for 'to blow'. Nirvana is popularly likened to a lamp that has got blown out. There is surely no 'blower' or 'I' that does the blowing, but it would seem that the lamp gets blown out of its own accord when it is devoid of the oil of the illusion of the 'I' that everlastingly seeks continuance. When the 'I' with its attendant *becoming* process ceases, there is the 'I'-less state. When perception is no longer restricted, perverted and distorted by the tunnel vision emanating from the 'I', what remains is the liberated, unconditioned state of *pure seeing* — the dimension of Reality where things are seen as they truly are. Some writers have called it 'annihilation'. Yes, the impurities, defilements or moral stains have got annihilated, but strictly speaking, there was never a permanent entity or 'annihilator' that did the work of

annihilation. Was it the 'I' that was annihilated? The 'I' cannot get annihilated because, having been a non-fact or a mere illusion, it never *actually* existed in the first place. Yet in another sense the 'I' had existed but only as a figment of the imagination.

Nirvana may be described as that extraordinary state of clarity wherein all illusions or non-facts have entirely disappeared and can never again arise.

Nirvana is that supreme state of total liberation wherein the mind is no longer driven by the ceaseless and insatiable demands of the ego. When the sense of individuality gets wiped out there comes into being a certain universality of outlook. There is an untrammelled intelligence and a heightened awareness. Above all, Nirvana may also be described as that spiritual dawning in which one naturally and effortlessly radiates boundless compassion to all because the petty 'I' with its self-centred pursuits is no longer there.

Throughout the centuries numerous scholars, philosophers and monks have hotly debated the nature of Nirvana. Their arguments were invariably based on their concepts about something that cannot be contained within the confines of mere concepts. Can the mind even imagine a 'beyond thought' realm that is far outside the reach of the mind? One sees immediately the futility of speculating about Nirvana since thinking is an activity of the conditioned thought-process whereas Nirvana alone is the pure unconditioned state. The mind can only move from thought to thought, from the known to the known, which means that one must cross the boundaries of the known and actually *experience* the transcendental that the intellect can never seek out and capture.

In the Buddhist world a view that is widely held is that the Buddha took some five hundred odd lives to perfect himself. It is therefore believed that as the road to Nirvana is so long and arduous, it can only be reached by a process of gradual evolution and purification. This belief has unfortunately contributed to a certain lethargy amongst Buddhists. Consequently many of them seem to lack a sense of urgency.

Rarely do they become seriously discontented with their long-suffering bondage to the law of karma. So it is heartening to find a statement in the scriptures that Nirvana is attainable right here and now, in this very life itself :

"The wise person, who is free from craving and rejoices in that freedom from attachment, who has conquered the appetites, will discover Nirvana even in this world"

The Dhammapada 89

Who has the patience to endure suffering for an indefinite period of time ? Let us rejoice that there is the possibility of immediate realisation, instantaneous spiritual transformation as it were in the twinkling of an eye. So if we fail to find the release of Enlightenment in this present life we have only ourselves to blame for our great lassitude and lack of enthusiasm for Nirvana.

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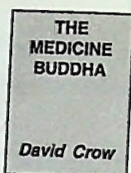
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